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## A Slump in Snooty Restaurants Makes It Easier to Pull Strings

### Wall Street Journal

THE HIGH-END restaurant business is in a slump, and that presents exclusive eateries with a new challenge: how to get you in the door without giving the impression they actually want you.

The industry's growth rate is at its lowest level since 1991, with a paltry 1.4% gain projected for this year, according to the National Restaurant Association. As a result, even the nation's snobbiest eateries are rolling out some tactics that give mere mortals a shot at a table without waiting weeks. Top restaurants from MK in Chicago to San Francisco's Frascati just started offering reservations on Web sites such as Dinnerbroker.com, which lets users book tables at fancy restaurants online. Some are also installing software such as Opentable that allows them to track customer behavior -- right down to how much they tip -- in order to reward repeat customers with choice service.

Even restaurants that have private reservation numbers for VIPs are now reaching out to the merely affluent. Balthazar, for example, a trendy New York bistro where getting a Saturday night table can be tough, is a member of Hot Plates, an American Express program launched last year that arranges for top restaurants in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles to hold at least one table a night for the exclusive use of platinum-card holders. (It's an haute cuisine spinoff of Amex's longstanding Fine Dining program, which deals in somewhat less-trendy spots.)

This means that while a supplicant at, say, Balthazar is trying to sweet-talk the reservationist, a credit-card concierge may be on the other phone -- booking a table for a cardholder. (Of course, the odds still favor those in possession of Balthazar's secret number. Hint: It's (212) 625-8665.)

For restaurants, these backdoor booking methods solve several problems at once. The average cost to a restaurant of taking reservations by phone is about \$4; by contrast, Internet reservations cost about \$1 per reservation. It also helps restaurants quickly fill the typical 12% of reservations that cancel.

Some restaurateurs are so enthusiastic about this and other new reservation techniques that they have made Internet booking mandatory during special promotions. For instance, the only way to book a table during the opening week of Blue Smoke, the New York barbecue spot that celebrity chef Danny Meyer opened in March, was on Opentable .com, the Web site that goes with the customer-tracking restaurant software. (Mr. Meyer is an investor in the site.)

Some diners actually choose to go the online route even if they are lucky enough to have private numbers, such as (206) 382-3555 for the Metropolitan Grill in Seattle. Cindy Kurman, a Chicago-based public-relations agent for restaurateurs, made reservations at some of New York's most exclusive spots a few days in advance of a recent visit to the city. But she didn't personally call the chefs she knows. Instead, she booked her tables on Opentable .com.

"I do everything on the Internet," Ms. Kurman says. "I even found my husband on the Internet."

Booking sites such as foodline.com, savvydiner.com and dinnerbroker.com, are gaining momentum as the industry looks for ways to cut costs. Opentable says its bookings have tripled in the past six months. Foodline.com, which filed for bankruptcy protection two years ago amid the dot-com bust, actually managed to relaunch last year with new funding, providing one measure of the optimism in the market for Web reservations.

For diners, in fact, the Web sites are the next-best thing to standing at the shoulder of the maitre d'. Most of the sites operate in real time, which means that the moment a table opens up (say, because of a cancellation), it becomes available on the Web site. Chefs and owners say it's best to check the sites around 5 p.m., because that's the time of day when restaurants often release tables that were being held in reserve.

Opentable and Foodline, in turn, have given restaurants a way to get in on the Holy Grail of marketing: tracking customer behavior. The companies offer restaurants software that lets them track their guests -- how often they dine, for example -- and even rate them on such factors as whether they show up for their reservations on time. As a result, when guests with high scores phone in for their next reservation, they can be rewarded with special treatment such as getting first shot on a busy weekend evening.

The burgeoning credit-card concierge ventures are simply another way the restaurants are trying to fill tables with big spenders. In addition to the American Express programs, Visa card members who hold Infinite and Signature cards can book

tables free through dinnerbroker.com, which otherwise charges a fee for booking. Diner's Club says it's developing its own program.

Repeat customers are the bedrock of the business, says Tracey Nierporent of Nobu. Of course, he concedes, there are some exceptions. "Let's face it," he says, "Brad Pitt gets a table whenever he wants."

Fancy restaurants are quietly offering more back-door ways to book tables, in an effort to keep the room filled while preserving the feel of exclusivity. Here's the dish on private VIP numbers and other tricks:

**Eatery:** Metropolitan Grill, Seattle

**Vip Trick:** Call the unlisted reservation line, which is (206) 382-3555.

**Internet Reservations:** Savvydiner.com

**Credit-card Concierge:** AMEX Platinum; Fine Dining

**Eatery:** Le Cirque, New York

**Vip Trick:** The unlisted reservation number is (212) 303-7703; unlike many eateries, you can book as far in advance as December.

**Internet Reservations:** No

**Credit-card Concierge:** AMEX Platinum; Fine Dining

**Eatery:** Balthazar and Pastis, both in New York

**Vip Trick:** The unlisted reservation line for both places: (212) 625-8665.

**Internet Reservations:** No

**Credit-card Concierge:** AMEX Platinum; Hot Plates

**Eatery:** db bistro moderne, New York **Vip Trick:** Maitre d' Erica Cantley holds the power: (212) 382-3366. If that doesn't work, just walk in. No-shows are common so you can often get a table within a half-hour.

**Internet Reservations:** Opentable.com

**Credit-card Concierge:** AMEX Platinum; Fine Dining

**Eatery:** Daniel, New York

**Vip Trick:** Chef Daniel Boulud, says: Ask to speak with him. One executive also points out that opening a "house account" (aka: giving them your credit-card number) boosts name recognition among the staff.

**Internet Reservations:** No

**Credit-card Concierge:** AMEX Platinum; Fine Dining

**Eatery:** Spago, Beverly Hills, Calif.

**Vip Trick:** Ask to speak with Tracey Spillane, general manager. It also pays to ask if you can introduce yourself to celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck (of frozen smoked-salmon pizza fame) -- he works the room.

**Internet Reservations:** Opentable.com; dinnerbroker.com

**Credit-card Concierge:** Visa Infinite and Visa Signature Concierge

**Eatery:** Chez Panisse, Berkeley, Calif.

**Vip Trick:** Ask to speak with the general manager, Gilbert Pilgram. To reserve, call exactly 30 days before you want to dine (the place doesn't take reservations further in advance)-and make the call at 9 a.m. (it'll book **Internet Reservations:** No

**Credit-card Concierge:** No

**Eatery:** Tru, Chicago

**Vip Trick:** Go through a hotel concierge -- Tru, like many top-drawer spots, reserves one table a night for **Internet**

**Reservations:** Opentable.com

**Credit-card Concierge:** No