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The Fixe Is In

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On Friday at 12:30 p.m., the bar at Proof is buzzing. There are stylish 30-somethings at a low table, a line of suits at the long bar. Nearly everyone has a glass of wine. It's a throwback to another time: before the economic meltdown, when indulging in a long lunch was fun and empowering, not a guilty pleasure.

But the crowds at this Penn Quarter restaurant are in fact a sign of the times. They've come for a bargain: lunch and a glass of wine for \$12.

Hit by the recession, restaurants are luring diners to the table by serving up deals: prix-fixe menus, discounts and incentives on online reservations.

And the response has been immediate. Proof, for example, went from filling three or four lunch orders a day in its bar to 30 within a week of instituting its special. At 701 restaurant, 60 percent of customers order the three-course lunch menu for \$24. Many of the deals are marketed as holiday specials, but restaurateurs say they won't be disappearing in the new year. "People need to feel good about coming to restaurants," said Ashok Bajaj, who owns five Washington restaurants including 701, Rasika and the Oval Room. "We need to make them feel like they're getting value."

Prix-fixe menus are a popular strategy. Downtown restaurants including Georgia Brown's, Mio, Vidalia and Urbana recently introduced set menus for lunch, dinner or both. Mio, which offers a three-course lunch for \$24, actually calls it the "recession special." In Georgetown, a neighborhood that caters to tourists and shoppers without expense accounts, Hook is offering any two dishes on the regular lunch menu for \$19. (The restaurant's tuna tartare appetizer is otherwise priced at \$14.)

"The old adage in the business is you never add it up and it always adds up," says New York restaurant consultant Clark Wolf. "People are more comfortable when they know what they are going to spend."

Restaurants that have long offered prix-fixe menus are reporting an uptick in requests for them. At Bastille, in Old Town Alexandria, many weekend diners gravitate to the lowest-priced of its several set menus, says co-owner Michelle Poteaux-Garbee. At Restaurant Eve, also in Old Town, Alexandria residents Jan and Bill Bassett head regularly to the bar for the \$13.50 two-course "Lickety Split" lunch. The retired couple said they like that they get the same food that's served in Eve's far pricier dining room -- and that the total bill is less than what they have paid at other, less-exclusive restaurants. "We've ordered two drinks and shared a hamburger [at Bookbinder's], and it cost \$40. This is the best value for the money," Bill Bassett said.

Set menus also help restaurants manage their costs. A reduced number of menu choices means fewer workers are needed in the kitchen. Limits also help reduce waste. If every diner is having either the creme brulee or the apple pie, the kitchen has a better sense of how much to prepare.

Prix-fixe menus have another advantage. When diners think they are getting good value, they sometimes are willing to spend a little more. They might order an extra dessert or add coffee at the end of the meal. Mark Fedorchak, general manager at the Liberty Tavern in Clarendon, says many guests who come in for the \$10 burger-and-a-pint deal end up ordering a second drink.

That theory has led several restaurants to offer lower-priced menus for New Year's Eve. At Tallula in Arlington, the set menu will include three courses for \$50 per person, vs. \$80 for a four-course menu last year. But Tallula is offering a \$10 foie gras supplement should any diner want to splurge, and wine is not included. At Mrs. K's Toll House in Silver Spring, the prix-fixe menu has been cut from \$95, with unlimited champagne, to \$75 with a champagne toast at midnight. "That's at 12, but we're hoping that they'll have a drink before then," says General Manager Spiro Gioldasis.

Many restaurants are offering promotions just for walking in the door. More than 100 Washington area restaurants are participating in online reservation system OpenTable's 1,000-point promotion, which rewards diners for booking at less popular times. OpenTable launched the promotion in 2004. But since August, when the economy began to tumble, the number of Washington restaurants participating has jumped 30 percent. The restaurants pay OpenTable \$7.50 per person instead of the usual \$1.

With the recession predicted to last through 2010, some restaurants are cutting prices. Many owners loathe the idea, fearing it sends a message of desperation. Consumers are happy to find clothing or appliances on sale at a 50 percent discount

because they know the product is the same. But in restaurants, especially fine-dining destinations, there's always a creeping suspicion that the food or service will suffer if prices are lower (hence the semiannual gripes about Restaurant Week menus). Nonetheless, fine-dining spots including the Grille at Morrison House in Alexandria and Vidalia downtown offer half-off wine on Sunday nights. Vidalia has extended its happy-hour prices on wine to include all cocktails.

Restaurateur Bajaj said he has always opposed discounting, worrying it teaches consumers to undervalue the service and food provided. But this month he launched a happy hour at Bardeo in Cleveland Park. All bottles of wine under \$50 are \$10 off; \$12 cocktails are \$10. "It's a neighborhood place, which is different than downtown, where people still have business to conduct and expense accounts," Bajaj says.

Tallula's ancillary EatBar has taken a similar approach, offering a series of cocktails for for \$5. In the hospitality business, "you have to know what the people want now," says General Manager Chris Mickey. "Right now, people want to go out and feel like they're getting a good deal."