



November 12, 2000

Dining à la Web

USA Today

Dining à la Web

USA Today

So you want to partake in the Net-to-food revolution? Step 1: Surf over to OpenTable.com. Step 2: Select your city and restaurant. Step 3: Register and book your table. Simple. But is it really better than picking up the phone? Yes, because you can not only book the reservation, but also find out instantly whether seats are available at your favorite dining spots, and at what time.

We all know the Internet is revolutionizing the desktop, but who'd have thought it would change the way we eat out? These days, you can easily find a far-flung restaurant, make a reservation for four at 6, or have the food delivered to your door without ever speaking with a human being.

Upside? The Web can help you expand your restaurant repertoire (less pizza, more paella) or find an open table in a hurry or on the go. Downside? Your city may not be wired yet. Make no mistake: The online restaurant game is still in its infancy. But in a few years, a whole lot more of us will use the Web (and our cell phones) to satisfy our most primal cravings -- for food, that is.

Appetizer: Finding a restaurant

Ask a friend to recommend a restaurant for, say, an intimate dinner with friends, and you're likely to come up with a couple of viable choices. But what if you're searching for a power-lunch spot in downtown Santa Fe? Or a kid-friendly meal in New York's trendy Soho? How about tip-of-the-top eats in Paris?

That's exactly the conundrum that led Tim and Nina Zagat to start keeping lists and ratings of favorite restaurants back in the '70s. Today, the two former lawyers and avid foodies have transformed what was once a home hobby into a series of best-selling restaurant guides and a one-stop Web site for definitive restaurant info.

Zagat.com lets would-be critics search and vote for favorite restaurants online, and has a few extra foodie features, like eminently sortable searches and, for the truly tech-savvy, a Zagat program for the Palm Pilot. But the big meal deal for Zagat these days is the wireless Internet. Portable pocket computers (like the Palm) and Internet mobile phones now let restaurant-seekers access information on the go. Translation: You can find a nearby burger joint while standing in the middle of downtown Chicago by punching buttons on your cell phone. Subscribers to AT&T's Digital PocketNet service now can access Zagat listings from their cell phones, while Palm owners can download a program called Vindigo (at vindigo.com) to find Zagat-reviewed restaurants within a few miles of where they're standing.

For those who don't live in one of the 45 cities Zagat covers, America Online's DigitalCity.com provides comprehensive restaurant listings for areas that sometimes get overlooked by other city guides, such as Rochester, N.Y., and Tulsa. The company also offers mobile restaurant searches for folks hooked up to the Net through their cell phones; when you dial in, you can search for an eatery by name or cuisine and click "auto-dial" to make a reservation.

Second course: Booking a table

So you want to partake in the Net-to-food revolution? Step 1: Surf over to **OpenTable.com**. Step 2: Select your city and restaurant. Step 3: Register and book your table. Simple. But is it really better than picking up the phone? Yes, because you can not only book the reservation, but also find out instantly whether seats are available at your favorite dining spots, and at what time. Don't know whether you'll be in the mood for Italian food for next Saturday night's date? Just wait until the day of: If a place you've heard of is booked, the site can suggest comparable alternatives where seats are available. For avid eaters-out, the service is a worthy one. "It's a great service if you don't know what restaurant you want, but you know what neighborhood you want to be in," says Andrew Martinez-Fonts, a San Francisco consultant who uses OpenTable. "Also, when you have to make a last-minute reservation and don't want to waste time calling 20 restaurants before finding an open table." But before

you rush to your computer to book Thai for next Thursday, be warned: OpenTable.com is available in only 18 cities, and in those cities many restaurants have not yet signed up.

Until Open Table comes to your neighborhood, you might try DinnerNOW.com, which actually places an automatic call to your desired restaurant when you request a reservation. With access to more than 350,000 eateries, it's far more comprehensive than other sites.

Third course: Ordering takeout

So maybe a four-course meal at a five-star restaurant won't do with the kids in tow. How about home delivery instead? At Food.com, hungry residents of Tacoma, Wash., can order takeout from Bella Nina's Italian restaurant, while suburban Cincinnatians can order orange chicken for delivery. Advantages: Menus for hundreds of eateries are online, so you don't even need to have heard of a local barbecue place to order spareribs in a jiff. And with tons of recommendations for Italian, Indian or sushi, it's easy to break out of that pizza-delivery rut.

If it's still just plain old pizza you crave, Food.com can likely net you a dozen different menus instead of your local Domino's.