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Fine dining a click away - Part I

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By Sue Stock

For Raleigh resident Bryan Formidoni, there's only one way to make a reservation at a restaurant -- OpenTable.com.

Whether it's for dinner with his wife or a business lunch for the public relations company he founded, Formidoni prefers the online reservation Web site instead of calling ahead.

The site, which includes about 7,000 restaurants -- including some international spots -- offers 24-hour access and is free to diners. It also has a rewards club for frequent diners. Formidoni can send customizable e-mail complete with maps and directions to the members of his dining party.

But most of all, it's the convenience that draws him to the site each time he wants to dine out.

"At a lot of restaurants, if they don't have a lunch service, you have to wait for somebody to be there at 4 p.m. to make a reservation," he said. "If it's a popular place, it's almost like you're trying to get concert tickets."

The San Francisco company that started OpenTable nine years ago has seen its number of member restaurants grow rapidly the past few years. Every month, more than 2 million seats in restaurants are filled by diners who have made reservations using the site. In the Triangle, 57 restaurants are signed on, a figure that has increased by 50 percent in the last year.

But despite the site's obvious appeal and growing popularity, deciding to join the network is a tough call for many restaurateurs because OpenTable is far from free for the restaurants it lists.

The company charges each restaurant a \$1,200 installation fee, plus a \$200 subscription fee monthly. There's also a per-person charge of 25 cents if the reservation is made through the restaurant's Web site or \$1 if it's made on OpenTable.com.

So far, many restaurateurs have decided the money is worth it.

The customized software streamlines the reservation process and allows a restaurant owner to know exactly who's coming to dinner.

More than that, a listing on the site is sure to bring out-of-town diners through the doors, and being included on the site can help boost a restaurant's reputation.

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