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## How to Get the Ungettable Table - Part I

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By Katy McLaughlin & Sarah Nassauer

Who would have thought the chance to spend \$200 on dinner could become such a competition? With nabbing a reservation at some restaurants next to impossible, we set out to crack the code.

Mariangela Sassi, a 35-year-old marketing consultant in San Francisco, has dined at fine restaurants around the world. But every time she calls the Slanted Door in her own hometown, she gets the same answer: Sorry, no tables.

What she should try next time: Sending an email to the BlackBerry of Debbie Phan, the restaurant's general manager, at [debbie@slanteddoor.com](mailto:debbie@slanteddoor.com). That's what the restaurant's regulars and VIPs do when they want to finagle a table no one else can get.

Times are tough for the mere mortal who wants to land a table at a top spot. That's because recent changes in the restaurant world, from a new cottage industry of "table scalpers" who nab desirable seats and then resell them to the shrinking number of tables of top eateries, have turned getting reservations into a global blood sport.

We set out to crack the code. Canvassing restaurateurs, maitre d's and general managers at about 40 of the hardest-to-get-into restaurants around the world, we learned the exact times tables open up (at Quince in San Francisco, it's sharply at noon) and the gatekeepers who VIPs tap when they want a seat (at Chicago's Tru, managing partner Scott Barton says to call him on his cellphone, currently 312-493-4281).

We also enlisted Dapper, a company that designs software to track information published on the Web. Dapper searched OpenTable, one of the largest online restaurant-reservation services, for 7 p.m. Saturday-night bookings at 120 places. It checked for tables roughly every half-hour for six weeks. Finally, several independent experts and statisticians analyzed the results.

Nearly 400,000 attempted reservations later, we discovered some basic rules for booking tables anywhere, as well as some that apply to specific restaurants. One rule: Plan ahead -- but not too far ahead. It turned out the "sweet spot" for advance booking is four weeks out, a window that gave us a success rate on OpenTable of about 47%. That dropped to 35% when we tried to book 40 days ahead.

Not that spontaneity doesn't pay off. From Excelsior in Boston to New York's Morimoto, certain restaurants shared a pattern. Tables were plentiful with about two weeks notice, then scarce a week out. But around Thursday the week we wanted to dine, a bunch of spots opened up -- the likely result of restaurants confirming reservations two or three days out then putting cancellations back in the system. (See accompanying chart for tactics geared to specific restaurants.)

There are also techniques to be learned from people who make it either their business or their hobby to get into so-called impossible places. Aren Sandersen, a 28-year-old software engineer in San Francisco, spent several nights, throughout the course of a few weeks, staying up late and pinging OpenTable again and again, searching for a table at the famously difficult French Laundry in the Napa Valley. Eventually, he discovered that success was most likely if he set his clock to Time.gov, then clicked "reload" at exactly 11:59:55 p.m.

After what he calls an "exquisite," meal at the restaurant, Mr. Sandersen created a Web site called [TheSandersens.com4](http://TheSandersens.com4) where he posted his tips and started offering a free service to help others book at the restaurant. "Are you struggling to make French Laundry reservations? Tired of calling and getting only busy signals?" a note on the home page reads. "No longer!"

Continued in [Part 2](#)