



June 18, 2007

Restaurant Reservations Go Online - Part I

The New York Times

By Katie Hafner

SAN FRANCISCO, June 17 — Town Hall, one of the busiest restaurants in this food-crazed city, seems the very model of old-fashioned dining. Patrons who arrive to claim their reserved seats are greeted by a hostess who consults a piece of paper with the day's reservations and leads her guests to the appointed table.

Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Doug Washington, left, and Mitchell Rosenthal are partners in Salt House in San Francisco, one of 7,000 restaurants using OpenTable.

But upstairs, in the restaurant's office, a different scene is playing out. In a veritable mission-control setting, a reservationist answers eight phone lines while seated in front of two computers that log reservations and hold an archive of past and future electronic bookings.

The software also reveals the idiosyncrasies of thousands of guests. The restaurant staff knows in advance, for instance, that a regular always insists on a table under a particular piece of artwork. They know about another person's request for kosher food — but only when dining in certain company. And there is the guest so reliably late that staff members know to add 45 minutes to the reservation time.

After decades of relying on telephones to book tables, and piles of index cards — or a maitre d'hotel's memory — to collect information about diners and their quirks, the restaurant business has finally gone unabashedly high-tech.

Technology may not make it any easier for diners to get a reservation at the most sought-after spots, like the French Laundry in Yountville, Calif., or Babbo in New York City. But the perseverance of a San Francisco-based company called OpenTable, which has come to dominate the business of online restaurant reservations, is making it much easier for restaurants to manage reservations and improve customer service.

The change is subtle, but sweeping. Some 7,000 high-end restaurants around the world now use OpenTable, with the highest concentration in New York and San Francisco. Hundreds more are signing on every month.

"All restaurants have to do it, whether you like it or not," said Charles Phan, the owner and executive chef of the Slanted Door, currently ranked as the most popular restaurant in San Francisco on OpenTable.com. "There's no way around it. At this point, there's no other technology or easy solution for making Web reservations."

Making a reservation through OpenTable costs the diner nothing. And it reduces the inconvenience. Say you want a table on short notice at a busy Manhattan restaurant — Danny Meyer's Union Square Cafe. Placing a phone call there usually requires calling during business hours, enduring loud jazz for hold music, and talking with a reservationist for a while before finding an acceptable time. OpenTable might give you the same results, but it will do the work in 10 seconds.

Andrew Shapiro, a business strategist who lives in Manhattan, said OpenTable was the first place he turned to for reservations. His loyalty was recently cemented when he used OpenTable to snag a reservation at a popular sushi restaurant around the corner within 15 minutes of his desired mealtime.

Mr. Shapiro said he and his wife had a couple of favorite restaurants that did not take reservations. "The truth is, those places have gotten less attention from us lately," he said. "It would be as if an airline didn't allow you to buy tickets online."

Mr. Shapiro said he also liked the one-click cancellation feature. And he likes the convenience of making a reservation at 2 a.m. (One-third of OpenTable's reservations are made between 10 p.m. and 10 a.m.)

The other end, however, is where the service has real benefit.

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