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This Table Is Reserved

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A growing number of Internet-savvy diners are enjoying the convenience of online booking, and writer Robert Hill is quickly becoming one of them.

Being a guy who lives online and loves Vancouver's evolving food scene, it was a big deal to discover new ways to make restaurant reservations via the Web. I had used the Internet to find places to eat but always preferred the peace of mind of booking over the phone. But this is the era of PayPal, online fund trading and Internet dating. I figured if people were willing to trust their stock portfolios to the Web, I could risk a dinner reservation. It was time to get with the program.

OpenTable.com lets users find restaurants around the world (with about 50 right here in B.C.) and make reservations through a system that is directly connected to the restaurant. It's got a snazzy search tool that lets you pick a region, city, neighbourhood, cuisine and/or price range. Just add a date and time, and the results pop up.

Ann Shepherd, OpenTable's Director of Consumer Marketing, says we shouldn't be surprised to learn they're making a million bookings a month: "It's free, it's confirmed and it's instant ... you're searching in real-time, literally writing in your own reservation."

The beauty of OpenTable.com is its flexibility. When you know exactly what you want, it's easy to hone right in on it. If you're feeling adventurous, try a broadened search and scan the results. You get a quick blurb on the place, its "dining style" (if you should dress up – or down), and all the other basics: parking, patio or fireplace, payment types accepted and hours.

So now that you've got all the info, why bother booking through OpenTable.com? Signup is super-simple and free. Once you make your online reservation, you can view it, change it, even cancel it, all online. You can also send e-mail invitations to your guests after you have a confirmed reservation. Send an invitation by simply filling out the "Invite a Guest" form on the reservation confirmation page. Each reservation you keep earns 100 reward points. One thousand points is worth 10 U.S. greenbacks or 13 loonies—not a bad return.

Cashing in points doesn't appear that tricky, but it takes them up to a month to mail out the redemption cheque. "It really is a form of currency, so there's a matter of security," Shepherd says. "But we are looking to streamline the process."

Tim Keller, co-owner and restaurant director of downtown Vancouver's Rare, is a big fan of the system. OpenTable software was "our number one priority" for the new venture, he says. From his perspective, it's more database than reservation system. Keller and his staff can add notes on customers' likes and dislikes. "It helps us exceed expectations. If we know that a customer loves a certain wine, we can have it chilled and waiting for him when he arrives. And if the server finds out he doesn't like garlic, we'll put that on file for future reference."

A note for the forgetful diner: The software can track how often you show up for your reservations. Enough no-shows and you may soon find it hard to get a table on a Friday night.

Keller also uses the service as a customer. Before traveling, he scopes out the local scene and makes bookings. "It's great. I've got my whole itinerary ... I know where I'm going every night," he says.

Savvydiner.com offers a similar service with a different approach. You make the reservation online, then a concierge from Savvydiner calls the restaurant to complete the booking. This turned me off at first. I envisioned a frustrating back-and-forth: Make the reservation; find out it isn't available; make another choice ... and on and on.

But Darrin Williams, sales and content director for the Seattle-based company, says that's not the reality. "You choose two time slots and two locations. If those don't work, we'll help you find another option, even if it's not a restaurant on our site."

Williams believes the personal contact is a strength. "We want to give great dining destinations and a great dining experience. And we handle all the customer's special instructions to make sure everything is perfect."

It's a good point; OpenTable.com lets you add requests, but a disclaimer states there's no guarantee they will be honoured.

When I'm a tourist, I want to discover hot new places, then brag about them when I get home. For that alone, OpenTable's wide selection in price and cuisine holds great appeal to me. But if I were planning a very special occasion, I would trust Savvydiner's humanintervention approach to take care of all the little details.

I guess I'm not quite ready to entrust that special reservation to a Web-based form. Either way, though, a growing number of diners are enjoying the convenience of online booking, and I'm quickly becoming one of them.