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Food Lovers Not Fazed By Paying Top Dollar

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by Carol Ness

Rising restaurant checks don't seem to be discouraging Bay Area diners, who are eating out more than last year, even though prices have gone up.

At least that's true of people who book their reservations online through OpenTable, according to a survey done for The Chronicle.

A full 97 percent of the 1,300 Bay Area diners surveyed said they'd be willing to spend \$50 per person on a nice meal out, including tax, tip and drinks.

People split pretty evenly between those who said it would have to be a special occasion and those who said "that's the average price these days."

But all of them made clear they expect a lot for their money. As one put it: "For that amount of money, I expect great food that is creative and exciting and a knowledgeable staff that is courteous. I would hope that the restaurant would have style and ... that (I) would want to go back again and again."

The survey doesn't represent a true cross-section of Bay Area residents. Those who book through OpenTable are younger and better off than the general public, and those answering the survey were disproportionately female. But there are a lot of them, and they eat out a lot; they filled 112,000 seats in greater Bay Area restaurants last month alone.

Other trends identified in the survey:

-- Diners are staying closer to home. Asked how their dining patterns have changed in the last year, 58 percent said "I'm eating in more spots in my neighborhood," by far the most frequent answer.

-- The survey confirms trends apparent through the downturn -- diners want good value and warm service.

"I like to go somewhere where the staff is happy to see you, not where it's 'What are you doing here?'" said Deborah Hiatt, a San Rafael resident who works in Mill Valley and is eating out more because "the kids are gone."

-- More than a third of those surveyed say they're eating in more small-plates restaurants than a year ago. From their comments, it seems feelings are mixed about small plates.

"I like to sample a wide range of what a chef can do and don't like having to eat huge portions," commented a fan. But another diner was just as vehement: "Do not like small plates and feel they are rip-offs!"

-- Vietnamese is the flavor du jour, along with Asian cuisines generally. And anyone who thinks Asian-fusion is so 20th century couldn't be more wrong.

-- New steakhouses, like El Raigon in North Beach, are tapping into an increased appetite for beef; 13 percent of people surveyed said they're choosing more red meat entrees.

-- Perhaps related to the hunger for meat is the fact that 25 percent of people surveyed are eating fewer carbs than a year ago.