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BBC World's Click Online

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Carmen Roberts went to Los Angeles to investigate a new way of booking restaurant tables online.

LA is the home of movie stars and beautiful people, where showbiz deals are clinched, and careers are brokered, over drinks and dinner at a see-and-be-seen restaurant. But getting a foot in the door at any exclusive eating establishment can often be a feat in itself.

Now, however, savvy on-line diners across America are able to get prime time reservations at a high end restaurant, just with the click of a mouse: OpenTable is an online reservation service that's helping to open doors.

One satisfied diner at the Chaya Brasserie in Beverley Hills told us "It helps to be 'someone' here; to be nominated for an Oscar or starting for the Lakers (LA's legendary basketball team). Unfortunately, that's not me, so I have to find a way to be recognised if I'm going to get into the restaurants I want."

OpenTable has more than 14 hundred member restaurants in more than 30 cities across the United States, including 88 in Los Angeles. It's also branching out in France. And while this website is an 'in' for diners, restaurateurs are also reaping the benefits. The computer not only logs bookings for them, but also enables waiting staff to make note of a customer's preferences, habits and idiosyncrasies.

Yuta Tsonada, manager Chaya Brasserie: "We like to have the clients' birthdays, their favourite tables, their likes and dislikes - perhaps their wife's name. Whatever they would like us to keep in the computer, that data assists us. Basically you don't have to keep it in your head like old-style management, it's all there in front of you."

Smart Maitre D's make a point of knowing their clients' credentials, because any seasoned waiter will tell you that the secret to getting a decent tip is all down to good customer service, and that means treating everyone like a VIP.

Another diner said: "It's nice for them to know little details, like if it's someone's birthday, you don't have to whisper it to the waiter in front of the person whose birthday it is. "

The software can also track a customer during their meal, to let you know what course they're on and whether service is appropriately paced. There's even notes about a customer's behaviour - whether the people at Table 10 are very fussy, or never leave a tip, for example - and all this, at the touch of a screen, and on your permanent dining record.

Jaime Shearls from OpenTable.com explained another benefit : "If a restaurant knows that a diner is consistently not showing up, they can possibly squeeze in someone else, because the other diner probably won't show up again. So it better enables them to get their good customers in."

In other words, you'd better honour your booking and tip well, or there will be a black mark on your file! But is this going too far? In this cyber age, just how much information are governments and corporations gathering about you?

Jaime Shearls: "All the notes I've seen for guests have been very complimentary in nature: their table preferences, wine preferences, server preferences, or any food allergies. They're things that are designed to improve your experience at the restaurant, and I've never had a consumer say they felt that was intrusive."

OpenTable argues that the data gathered by individual establishments is not available to any other restaurant. Besides, why shouldn't people be accountable for their behaviour, especially in a public place, like a restaurant? But in any case, even if Big Brother is now watching us eat, the fact remains that the watchful eye often results in better service and VIP treatment. And judging by the increasing number of subscribers and internet users, there's no shortage of patrons queuing up for a double helping.

[See Carmen's Report](#)