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Your table is open online

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By Stephanie Romine

Brian Goldberg had been trying to make reservations at Nada for a couple of weeks, but the new Mexican restaurant at 600 Walnut St. in downtown Cincinnati was booked for the times and dates that worked for him and his wife.

Finally, Goldberg, 30, of Mount Adams, stopped calling.

Instead, he booked a table using OpenTable.com, an online reservations system used by 32 restaurants in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky.

"We wanted to go on Saturday" night, he said, "and we still can't get in until 8:30."

Whether it's snagging a table at a hot new place or finding a reservation for a special occasion – like Valentine's Day, the second-most popular day for dining out according to the National Restaurant Association – more diners are turning to the Web for their reservations.

Restaurant managers say OpenTable lets customers make reservations any time, prevents overbooking and – because the service sends 24-hour reminders and follow-up emails – cuts down on the number of no-shows.

"It takes out human error," said Tim Kieliszewski, the general manager at Morton's the Steakhouse in Carew Tower.

His restaurant sees about 35 percent of reservations made through OpenTable.

OpenTable started in San Francisco in 1998, when a dot-com entrepreneur's wife became frustrated as she scrambled to make reservations one night.

The system has been used in Cincinnati for about three years.

Morton's and Palomino were among the first to use the system in Cincinnati, according to Liz Johannesen, the senior manager of restaurant marketing for OpenTable.

By last year, about 17 restaurants were using the system, half the number currently offering online reservations.

OpenTable is free for customers, who create an account online. They can make reservations, get directions, notify staff of a special occasion and change their plans with a few clicks and keystrokes.

Users earn 100 points each time they book using the site. After they accumulate at least 2,000 points, diners can get a gift certificate (for 2,000 points, diners earn \$20) to use at any OpenTable restaurant.

For a restaurant like Morton's, which draws a large number of business travelers, booking online can instantly build a rapport with a customer.

"When you're at a Morton's, where we have locations worldwide, this will tie into where they've dined with us at other Morton's," said Kieliszewski. "It's really great for us."

OpenTable charges restaurants about \$1,200 for a hard drive and monitor system that usually sits at a hostess stand, said Johannesen.

Restaurants also pay about \$200 a month, which includes training, online and phone support and service.

The system lets restaurants decide how many tables to reserve for walk-in clients – Jeff Ruby's Tropicana always keeps a few, said general manager Michael Mink – or whether to close online reservations on special occasions.

Mesh in West Chester Township books about 25 percent, or 600, of its monthly reservations online, said chef Paul Sturkey.

But for Valentine's Day, he and wife Pam Sturkey have a special four-course, fixed-price menu in place.

They aren't allowing online reservations that night because they need to explain the menu to customers, he said.

"OpenTable allows the restaurants to track a guest's frequency and their preferences," said Sturkey, who says he uses the system when he travels. "If they've been to the restaurant before, they may put 'I love table 21, or I love server Brandon (in the comments section).' We accommodate that, and it builds guest loyalty."

Tom Mann of Villa Hills is a loyal customer of JeanRo Bistro in downtown Cincinnati who has been booking online for a year and a half.

He uses Open Table to find new restaurants, too.

"We found Red (in Hyde Park) through OpenTable, and we really like Red. It's super," said Mann. "It's really the best steak I've ever had."