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Want a table? How about 5 or 9:30?

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From Between Meals by Michael Bauer

The permutations of questions from my reservation entry seem to be endless. Several readers emailed commenting about rude reservationists, asking for ways to get a table at the French Laundry and about why at some places, even when they call weeks in advance, will block out the prime-time reservations. You've heard of 9 to 5; well, this is the restaurant version: 5 or 9.

Oftentimes the restaurant saves some tables for good customers who call at the last minute; sometimes the kitchen wants to stagger the reservations and will rarely seat a party at 7 p.m., for example. For others, I truly think it becomes a power trip.

Welcome to my life. Believe me, I can feel your pain. Because I use pseudonyms when making reservations, I have none of the advantages of becoming known as a good customer, so you'll generally find me dining very early or very late.

Just recently I was making a reservation at Nopa, the much-deserved restaurant of the moment, and we asked for one of the booths in the center of the room. The host laughed, as in, "No way is that ever going to happen."

We did end up with the booth, but as you might suspect, I've encountered my share of rude reservationists who act as if they're doing you a favor by answering the phone.

Part of the appeal of eating out is that the best places make everyone feel special. It's demoralizing not to be able to get a table at a decent time.

Sorry, I've gone off on a tangent and I still haven't answered the main question. How do you get a prime-time reservation?

Many years ago I asked this question to top chefs around the country, and Wolfgang Puck told me that he would cultivate a few restaurants that would become his "regular" spots -- a place he could call and get into any time. He would also try the new places, but he'd always return to his regular places.

That's the best long-term strategy, but there are others that take a little less time. I've mentioned before about calling the night you want to dine; often there are cancellations and you can get in at the last minute.

My secret weapon is to try to book on OpenTable. I've had situations where I couldn't get a reservation by calling the restaurant, but was able to nab one online.

I love OpenTable. You don't have to deal with rude waitstaff or wait on the phone for hours, and I've never been confronted with a lost reservation.