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MATTERS OF TASTE

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They have a file on you

* Restaurants are using computers to record what diners eat, drink, say and do. All in the name of service.

Like a rapidly increasing number of restaurants, the Brentwood Restaurant & Lounge maintains a computerized database on its customers' preferences, habits and idiosyncrasies. Although these notations are designed primarily to provide better service, they also include such entries as:

"Please provide prompt service. He believes he's the biggest writer in Hollywood and has told us so."

"Don't seat at [table] #19. He tried to have sex there last time he was in."

"Never take this person's reservation. Ever ... ever ... if you value your life."

These directives -- which become a permanent part of the customer's dining history, instantly available to the restaurant staff with a couple of touches on the computer screen -- are made possible thanks to software developed by OpenTable.com, an online restaurant reservation service.

OpenTable.com has more than 1,400 member restaurants in more than 30 cities -- including 88 in Los Angeles. Most tend to be upscale -- Bastide, Spago Beverly Hills, Melisse, Michael's and L'Orangerie among them -- but some are much more modest (Bombay Cafe, for example, and Pete's Cafe & Bar, World Cafe and Barefoot restaurant).

Although OpenTable initially emphasized online reservations in its marketing campaign, that function accounts for, on average, only about 5% of the total reservations at member restaurants. A more important element of the service -- to restaurants and customers alike -- is the data-tracking capability of the OpenTable software for all customers, no matter how they made their reservations. OpenTable enables restaurants to collect and access quickly such information as their customers' favorite wines, waiters, water and tables, their food allergies, their birthdays and anniversaries -- everything they need to know to "treat every customer like a VIP," in the words of Thomas Layton, chief executive of OpenTable.

Making customers feel pampered

In Los Angeles, where egos seem especially large -- and especially fragile -- and where dietary habits often range from the merely exotic to the obsessively ascetic, the ability to make customers feel pampered and important is especially useful.

"OpenTable lets us give customers the feeling that, 'These people know who I am and they care about what I want and what I like and don't like,' " says Harvey Friend, general manager of the Water Grill in downtown Los Angeles.

"If a guy comes in for the fifth time, and he likes his crab taken out of the shell, we should know that and do it and not have to ask him," Friend says. "If he's allergic to onions or garlic, we should know that and not have to ask him."

Some information that restaurants enter as "customer codes" or "customer notes" are far more personal -- and not always complimentary.

"Orders and eats at a snail's pace. Schooled in hell and graduated with honors," reads the note on one woman who dines regularly at Michael's in Santa Monica.

"Very cheesy guy," reads another. "Always drinks Veuve Cliquot but pronounces it 'Vave Click-it'. Always comes in with a different girl. Doesn't tip well. Usually pretty soused by the time they leave."

Don't such records raise questions about invasion of privacy and whether Big Brother is now watching you eat?

"I was concerned about that when we first started with OpenTable," says Danny Meyer, who owns five New York restaurants, including Gramercy Tavern and Union Square Cafe. "But I used to keep track of regular customers' seating and waiter preferences and birthdays and favorite wines and all on 5x7 cards; now we use computers to do the same thing, only better."

I agree -- and I realize I may be in a minority. In our cyber age, many people worry increasingly about how much information the government and corporate America gathers about them. I worry about that too.

But the OpenTable data gathered by individual restaurants is not available to any other restaurant, and I think it's perfectly legitimate -- and ultimately beneficial to most customers. I also think that if you're obnoxious, if you're rude, if you repeatedly make reservations and fail to show up, if you're a lousy tipper, well, why shouldn't the restaurant make note of that -- and act accordingly? Even if that means refusing your reservation.

Why shouldn't people be accountable for their behavior -- especially in a public place, like a restaurant?

Besides, the vast majority of customer notes I've seen are informational, not negative, and they're designed solely to help restaurants serve customers better, to meet their various needs and desires and -- yes -- to cosset and coddle them.

If you prefer a certain table or a certain waiter, if it's your wedding anniversary, if you prefer olive oil to butter, why shouldn't the restaurant keep track of that and cater to those preferences?

I, for example, appreciate restaurants knowing that my wife wants a Chivas on the rocks, with a water back, as soon as she comes in and that I enjoy a glass of Champagne, usually bring my own wine and like most everything cooked rare.

"A customer may not have been in for eight months but we can still say, 'Hello, Mr. Johnson. It's so nice to see you again. Happy anniversary,'" says Jon McGavin, a food and beverage director for the Ritz-Carlton hotels. "And then, without his asking, we bring him a vodka and tonic, made with Absolut, his brand."

Paul Einbund, sommelier at Melisse in Santa Monica, recalls an evening when "a customer came in whose wife just had a baby, and I couldn't remember the baby's name. I knew we'd entered it in OpenTable so I ran over, tapped the computer screen, got the name, walked to their table and said, 'So, how's little Madison Brianna?'

"They were thrilled."

OpenTable also enables restaurants to follow customers' progress through dinner, to know what course they're on and whether service is appropriately paced -- and to build an e-mail list for special events and reservation confirmations (although they don't have customers' e-mail addresses unless the customers provide them).

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