OpenTable™

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WHEN CHUCK TEMPLETON'S wife scrambled a few years ago to make dinner reservations for visiting relatives, he was struck by an idea. Why not allow people to book tables the way they book airline tickets? Templeton turned his idea into OpenTable.com Inc., a restaurant reservation service based in San Francisco that allows people to book tables in real-time over the Internet.

Diners log on to OpenTable.com's Web site and indicate the date, time and number of people in their party. Then they search available tables by cuisine, restaurant name or neighborhood. Once search criteria is selected, OpenTable.com returns a list of available times at participating restaurants. Booking a table is simply a matter of clicking on the desired time.

Templeton, OpenTable.com's president and CEO, first signed up restaurants in the San Francisco area before branching out to Chicago, Seattle and New York City. While some restaurants are reluctant to tamper with traditional paper-based reservation systems, Templeton says he's not out to shake up the restaurant business. "Our goal is to help restaurants increase the level of service," he says. "We're not trying to replace the host."
Restaurants pay an upfront fee and monthly service charge in return for a listing, software and hardware upgrades, and a connection to the Internet. OpenTable.com collects fees based on transactions or per person for reservations made through the Internet. Unlike Foodline.com Inc. (see Threads, "A Guide to Fine Dining," CIO Section 2, Sept. 1, 1999), OpenTable.com will not divulge the spending or tipping habits of individual customers to restaurants. Restaurants will, however, get an aggregate snapshot of dining trends and a high-tech way to identify regulars.

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