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Meal reservations online better than holding phone

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Tired of searching for just the right restaurant? Frustrated by spending time on hold to make a reservation? And steamed, after finally getting through, to find the place booked solid?

The brains behind OpenTable.com thought there had to be a better way. So they came up with a reservation network. Diners can book a table online, get instant confirmation, have notification sent via e-mail to all members of their party, specify table preferences or dietary needs and get a map and driving directions. What's more, for diners, there's no charge to do any of this.

The San Francisco-based Internet company, which went online two weeks ago, has only about 25 Bay Area restaurants in its reservations system so far, including San Jose's E&O Trading Company, Straits Cafe in Palo Alto and Lark Creek in San Mateo and Walnut Creek. But it's adding more places daily. And someday, company officials hope to expand the service to all major fine-dining cities across the globe.

"People are booking hotels and air fares online already. They've really shown a preference for doing things like this over the Internet," says Sid Gorham, OpenTable.com's chief operating officer.

Gorham, former vice president of marketing and business development at Aloha Networks in San Francisco, started the company with Eric Moe, a former business consultant and now OpenTable.com's chief technology officer, and Chuck Templeton, former restaurateur and former product marketing employee for Qvester Technology Inc. in Fremont, who is now OpenTable.com's president.

When accessing the site at www.opentable.com, you can either plug in a day and time and search all restaurants for a table available, or you can pick a restaurant and see if there is an open table at the time desired.

A credit card number is required to book. Cancellations must be made at least three hours ahead of time or the diner's credit card is charged \$20.

Although a few restaurants have backed away from handing over control of their coveted reservations book to consumers online, others have welcomed the new system, especially because it allows them to track how often regular customers come in and compute the restaurant's no-show percentage. Lark Creek San Mateo has been averaging a couple of reservations a week with the online method. "It's good that it gets the paperwork off the desk," says Manager Keely Strong.

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