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Share a meal, and time, with your Mom

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Taking your mom out is a perfect last-minute Mother's Day gift

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After racking my brains for last-minute Mother's Day gift ideas, an old "borscht belt" joke popped into my head. The joke goes as follows: What do most mothers really want for dinner? The answer: To make reservations! I then ran the concept by my significant other's mother and she said, "That's the best, even better than spa products." So if it's good enough for her, it's good enough for the rest of the mothers in America, I concluded.

But getting a good spot in a hot restaurant for Mother's Day is always a challenge. After flowers and cards, a meal out is the gift of choice, according to a poll of 1,000 people, ages 18-65, conducted by Brand Keys, Inc., a New York City-based research company.

It turns out Mother's Day is the second most popular occasion to eat out, according to the National Restaurant Association. The business association estimates 38 percent of Americans dine out in one of the nation's 870,000 restaurants.

It's still not going to be easy to land a reservation on the day set aside to celebrate motherhood. But who ever said it was? And why should it be? After all, it is Mother's Day. Savvy last-minute shoppers, however, will take advantage of restaurant reservations Web sites.

Reservations shortcuts

Opentable.com, one of the first restaurant bookers online, helps table shoppers make reservations for free in real time. The San Francisco-based Web site offers reservations at about 1,800 restaurants in close to 30 cities. The mechanics are relatively simple. Just click on the city of interest, enter a date and time, and in less than a minute (with a cable modem), a list of available slots appears. In Northern New Jersey, where my "mother-in-law" lives, six restaurants had spaces at the desired time. Securing a reservation requires filling out a short form with basic information.

For Mother's Day, opentable.com set up a separate link to restaurants in 11 of its most active markets — Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, New York City, San Francisco, San Diego, Seattle and Washington. It's an easy way for bargain shoppers to hone in on the deals, says Thomas Layton, the company's founder.

And despite the madness at Mother's Day, deals can be had. For example, Mom gets a free glass of champagne at the Mother's Day Tea offered at Atlanta Grill in Atlanta. In Denver, Colo., diners can take advantage of the \$25 buffet at 1515restaurant.com. Make sure to check out the video on the restaurant's Web site, which shows off the interior of the circa 1860 brick building.

Layton also offers a hot tip for last-minute table shoppers. Even on Mother's Day, there will be cancellations, says Layton. The beauty of real time reservations is consumers can snag them at the last minute as they become available.

A tough day to sneak in for dinner

On the other hand, dinnerbroker.com, which also offers reservations in real time, will have little or no inventory for Mother's Day, admits Ben Dehan, the company's founder. The San Francisco-based company is best known for brokering discounts, such as off-peak or "early bird" reservations at a discount of up to 30 percent.

"The closer it gets to Mother's Day, the harder it will be to get a reservation anywhere," adds Dehan, who says dinnerbroker.com pulls most of its deals off its site for Mother's Day. Referring to the 38 percent national average, "The

restaurants don't need us on that day," he explains.

Super savvy shoppers may pick up a \$25 gift certificate for as little as \$10 at dinnerbroker.com. But few, if any, gift vouchers will be available for May 9, says Dehan.

The best use of this site for Mother's Day would be plan on cooking mom a home-cooked meal on May 9, and then giving her a gift certificate she can use when it's less mobbed. This way she gets the best of both worlds.

In contrast to dinnerbroker.com, Mother's Day is traditionally a tremendous day for restaurant.com, says Scott Lutwak, founder of the discount restaurant gift certificate program, which features about 4,000 restaurants in 47 cities. Most \$25 gift certificates cost about \$10. The Arlington Heights, Ill.-based company also offers "mega certificates," which may be redeemed for any \$25 certificate on the site.

Reservation roulette

Real people — not real time — draws table shoppers to savvydiner.com, says a company representative for the Seattle-based Web site. Consumers request reservations online and then nonvirtual "savvy concierges" place the reservations at one of 600 high-end restaurants in about 32 markets, he explains.

The obvious disadvantage when booking at savvydiner.com is: A reservation request does not guarantee a spot. Confirmation can take an hour or it could take days.

On the flip side, savvydiner.com offers that personal touch, which most of us say we crave in the electronic age. In theory, a real person could minimize the likelihood of an electronic glitch.

And in that vein, I have to retell a short story — no surprise ending but it illustrates a point. A few years back, on a trip to visit family out West, I made reservations in advance online at the Culinary Institute of America in Napa Valley, Calif. When we arrived, the hostess had no record of the transaction. After some cajoling, the hostess found a place for us in the main dining room and the meal only topped off the wonderful day, (which included a picnic in a local winery and mud baths in Calistoga.)

Impressed with my cyber skills at the time, my significant other's sister said, "Now let's see you get reservations at the French Laundry," indeed the hot spot in Napa Valley, still. Because of recent renovations, the French Laundry will not be open for Mother's Day this year. But for reservations at a later date, check back with opentable.com, which recently added the fine restaurant to its repertoire. Layton also says he made reservations at the French Laundry using opentable.com nine days in advance of dining there. The restaurant is usually booked solid at least 60 days in advance.