



Stunning locations, beautiful presentation and exceptional ingredients are all part of the supper club experience.

*W*ant to find the hottest meal in town? Look underground

The restaurant was bustling, but I wasn't looking for a table. I nodded at the hostess and slipped through the dining room of New York's sexy, red-walled Paris Commune to the stairs at the back of the house. Down like Alice into the rabbit hole I went, through a curtained foyer and into a cozy private room aglow with candles and about twenty other nattily clad attendees, lucky enough like me to get the secret e-mail invite. I found my name prettily scrawled on a card at a long dining table and took my seat just in time to hear a fork tinging the edge of a wine glass, hushing us all to attention. The *New York Post's* Nadine Rubin pushed her dark-rimmed glasses back on her nose, stood, and, in her South African accent, introduced the evening's guest of honor: ostrich, seared and sliced.

The Red Rooster is part of a groundswell of public-secret dining clubs that have popped up all over the country during the past five years or so. Enthusiasts cite a backlash against celebrity-chef culture and a desire to get back to basics. Some founders, like those of New York's Homeslice West, began out of nostalgia for the Southern food they grew up on. Others, like the instigators of Austin's Supper Underground, just really, really like to cook. But there are three things they all have in common. Fresh, farm-to-table ingredients are often de rigueur at these down-low dinners, which seek to bring people together around a meal—but snagging an invite can be tricky. We've brought to the table some of the best of the bunch.

Homeslice West | New York, New York | www.homeslicewest.com

Three years ago, friends Becky and Hayden grew weary of the uptight New York dining scene, longing for a place where they could meet up with friends, have a good, simple meal, and chill out. So they took it upon themselves to provide it in the form of Homeslice West. About once a month, these Dixieland expats put together a reasonably priced dinner (around \$50) in an ever-changing location for about twenty hungry guests. "We do it for the love of

unfussy cooking,” says Becky. “If we can have every person that experiences an ‘underground’ eat something new and leave having made a new friend, we win.”

Plate and Pitchfork | Portland, Oregon | www.plateandpitchfork.com

Entering its sixth season creating farm-inspired dinners, Portland’s Plate and Pitchfork strictly adheres to local ingredients, serving each meal to about one hundred guests at a different working farm (which diners get to tour before sitting down to eat). Says cofounder Erika Polmar: “We have a short season to take advantage of the best produce and best weather in our fine, rainy state of Oregon. You’ll find us on farms from late July through the end of August. Our entire season sold out in less than four hours, so I guess you could say the response from the public is overwhelming.”

Supper Underground | Austin, Texas | www.supperunderground.com

With seven hundred hungry Austinites clamoring for a seat at Hannah Calvert and Tasso Ziebarth’s Supper Underground, it’s nothing short of amazing that they started with only a few friends who showed up for dinner. Today guests are selected by lottery, and the location for the four-course dinners, frequently a private residence, changes every month. During the upcoming months, expect to see local late-summer bounty, like heirloom tomatoes in all their juicy glory, crisp apples accompanying bacon-wrapped pork loin, or heady butternut squash soup topped with spiced walnuts.

The Red Rooster | New York, New York

The Red Rooster doesn’t fly far from its coop, a private dining room at the chic downtown corner restaurant Paris Commune. Founded by the eatery’s owners—Laurence Isaacson, Jaime Martinez, and Hugo Uys—the free but invite-only club began in February 2008 as a way to not only celebrate poultry but bring back the art of dinner conversation. Bonus: there’s always a guest speaker, like author Josh Ozersky, winner of a James Beard Foundation award, who opined on the topic of foie gras during one dinner—to introduce the bird at hand and encourage the conversation around the table to take flight.

Rogue Apron | Atlanta, GA | www.roqueapron.com

Rogue Apron is so underground, its founder will not reveal her real name: she goes by the moniker Lady Rogue to keep the local health-code constabulary off her trail. At these fast-booking, imaginative monthly dinners the only element that stays the same is the pairing of home-brewed beer and a far-flung cuisine. But Lady Rogue is cooking up more than just the grub: “The social-dining movement has the potential to make fundamental changes in how people approach their relationship with food,” she says. “Strangers come together to experience a meal under unusual circumstances, and leave as friends.”

One Pot | Seattle, Washington | www.onepot.org

Michael Hebb is no stranger to the supper club circuit or, for that matter, to running a restaurant. The former Portland, Oregon, resident and progenitor of “Kill the Restaurant,” which started as a supper club itself and has turned into a national antiestablishment movement, has owned three legitimate eateries and also put together off-the-radar meals that are, he says, “a bit more of a practice of conceptual art.” His “guerrilla dinners” are meant to inspire thinking as well as salivating, and occur everywhere from homes to art galleries. One recent series of dinners was set up alongside Interstate 5, which cuts through a wide swath of wildlife habitat, with the intention of sparking a dialogue about development and nature. Hebb sums it up like this: “The table is an important cultural archetype and tool that we’ve really stopped using.”

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