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Supper Underground

By Rachel Feit

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www.supperunderground.com

"Dinner parties follow a pattern," observed Hannah Calvert. "At the beginning there's a shyness, where everyone hesitates to interact; but by the end, people are typically jovial, heading out for after-dinner drinks, and often exchanging phone numbers." She should know. Calvert has been hosting roving dinner parties for more than three years, using the name Supper Underground.

Supper Underground is part of the hip supper-club trend that trades the conventional restaurant dining model – where you studiously avoid mingling with other patrons, even if they happen to be sitting less than two feet from you – for the warmth and geniality you would expect from a large dinner party. Supper Underground dinners are invitation-only events, held at a different location each time, with limited space and seating, where dinner and wine are offered to about 30 guests in exchange for a \$60 "donation" toward food, wine, facility, and preparation costs.

To score an invitation at a Supper Underground dinner, one must first join the mailing list, which currently tops out at around 1,600. Dinners are held every few months; they're announced by e-mail, and listers have 24 hours in which to respond. The guests are decided by lottery, since responses always outnumber available seats. So far Calvert and her crew (though an accomplished cook, she leaves cuisine to partners with more experience catering to large groups) have done about 30 dinners; most have been in private homes, though a few have been in restaurants or commercial spaces such as Portabla, Lamberts, and Whole Foods.

The dinner I attended in March was held at a historic home in East Austin. The meal was visually appealing and competent: tomato bisque and salad, followed by salmon with cilantro habanero aioli and spring vegetables over Israeli couscous, and concluding with homemade rose-scented vanilla ice cream with fresh berries and chocolate lace cookies. But the true charm was less the food than the opportunity to enjoy it amid twinkling lights in an outdoor garden of a quaint 19th century house, with an engaging group of people whom I had never met. At dinner's end, I found myself giving handshakes and hugs, with promises to meet up again soon.

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