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## Pop-up popularity continues to grow

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By Addie Broyles

American-Statesman Staff

When Hannah Peters sends out an email to the almost 4,000 people on the mailing list for her Supper Underground supper club, hundreds respond with a request to attend a dinner at an unknown venue with an unknown menu.

On the opening day of the South by Southwest Interactive Conference in 2011, hundreds of people lined up outside a 5,000-square-foot pop-up store in downtown Austin to have a look at the iPad 2.

During SXSW 2010, musician Jack White and Third Man Records hosted a four-day pop-up record shop in restaurant Frank, and after a successful Google Village pop-up in the Rainey Street District during SXSW 2012, the California search giant brought its famed Googleplex to Charlotte for the Democratic National Convention in September.

Whether it's seats at a supper club or albums from a record shop temporarily housed in the back of a restaurant, Americans are clamoring for extraordinary dining and retail experiences, and SXSW is a magnet for pop-ups from businesses looking to capitalize on the excitement and enthusiasm in the jam-packed downtown corridor.

This year, advertising agency JWT is setting up a five-day pop-up advertising agency called Walter to develop marketing programs for fledgling start-ups at the festival.

Converse, the shoe company that runs the Rubber Tracks recording studio in Brooklyn, is setting up a pop-up music studio in Austin for two weeks during this year's festivals. (Austin is just the latest stop for the roving studio, which was here last year, too, and has allowed more than 420 artists in Los Angeles, Montreal, Brooklyn and Toronto to record their music for free.)

How and why businesses are flocking toward pop-ups — and why we can't seem to get enough of them — will be the subject of a panel at 3:30 p.m. Saturday called Pop (Up) Culture with panelists including Patrick Keenan, co-founder of the San Francisco-based company SQFT (pronounced "square foot"), which helps connect entrepreneurs who need space with those who have idle space to spare.

Long-term property rental doesn't fit every business' needs, Keenan says. Start-ups or even individuals might not have the funding or the client base to sign a year or two-year lease, but they can test the waters with new locations, products or services or expand their existing brand reach into new markets by a shorter commitment.

The pop-up label allows entrepreneurs to experiment without the baggage of "failure," and it's an opportunity for property owners to diversify their income stream and try out a variety of partnerships before committing to a longer one.

Pop-ups also allow online-only businesses to have an offline presence without the long-term commitment of renting a space or making changes to the business plan. Before the Internet, a business relied on its location, combined with traditional and

word-of-mouth advertising, to build an audience, but social media allows entrepreneurs to connect with potential customers long before opening a tangible space.

To show just how diverse pop-ups can be, SQFT hosted a pop-up day on Aug. 1 along two city blocks on Market Street in San Francisco with a pop-up library, yoga studio, bicycle repair shop, restaurant and art fair.

On the opposite coast, John Knowles oversees four pop-up spaces in midtown Manhattan near his family's Roger Smith Hotel at Lexington Avenue and 47th Street.

Knowles says that pop-ups are an opportunity for entrepreneurs of all backgrounds. "You have to come with a purpose and some gusto to want to try something out," he says. "It's opening up access for people with the entrepreneurial spirit and big ideas" who might not have the capital or desire to launch at full scale space right away.

The first Roger Smith pop-up space launched in 2009, and now Knowles hosts vendors that are often tied to holidays or events happening in the city, such as a Scottish store opening during Tartan Week in April.

During the Roger Smith Cookbook Conference last month, Knowles teamed up with the Brooklyn-based Heritage Radio Network to create a pop-up radio studio so radio hosts could easily interview authors and guests of the conference.

Keenan says that the roots of pop-ups likely date back to the early days of commerce, when markets would set up in public spaces at a certain time every day or week and also when traveling vendors would set up shop, display their wares and then move on to the next city.

Artists, particularly those who couldn't afford official gallery showings, have also long used unexpected spaces for pop-up shows, but few entrepreneurs have embraced pop-up culture quite like chefs and culinary aficionados who don't necessarily want to run a typical restaurant.

For established chefs with traditional restaurants, pop-ups are an opportunity for collaboration and experimentation with other chefs, new ingredients or new markets.

City Grit culinary salon in New York keeps the same venue but with chefs who travel from around the country to cook in founder Sarah Simmons' kitchen. (The Contigo chefs cooked for a sold-out dinner there two weeks ago.) In January, California chef Gary Menes, who hosts a pop-up restaurant called Le Comptoir in Los Angeles, was one of more than a dozen chefs who cooked at Foreign & Domestic's Indie Chefs Week.

"The Taste" host Ludo Lefebvre worked his way to the top of several California restaurants before ditching traditional restaurants altogether to focus entirely on his pop-up LudoBites, which famously has no address or phone number. Last month, chef Paul Petersen used the cooking school at Central Market to host a pop-up of Little Texas Bistro, the beloved Buda restaurant that he closed in 2006 to take over the kitchen at the Gage Hotel in Marathon.

During two pop-up dinners at Donn's Depot next week, Chris Chism, formerly of Jeffrey's, Cipollina and 2 Dine 4 Fine Catering, will debut the Tex-Mex-German-Czech concept behind Halfcircle Eleven, which he hopes to open as a brick-and-mortar restaurant sometime in the next year or so. (Tickets to the dinners on March 13 and 14 cost \$50, and information and reservations are available at [halfcircleeleven.com](http://halfcircleeleven.com).)

For non-chefs like Peters, who has had a non-food full-time job for all seven years that she has run Supper Underground, pop-ups are an opportunity to fulfill a desire to create a common space over food without actually starting a restaurant.

RL Reeves Jr., who writes the popular food blog [ScrumptiousChef.com](http://ScrumptiousChef.com), has been hosting monthly pop-up dinners since last summer as a way to flex the chef muscles he built during culinary school and more than a decade in the restaurant industry.

"I always felt like I was born to cook," he says, and the pop-ups are a test kitchen for a possible brick-and-mortar restaurant in the future. Plus, he wanted a way to give back to the community that supports him online and provide a lower cost pop-up experience for diners who can't afford \$60-and-up-per-person seats at a traditional supper club or special dinner at a restaurant.

"I didn't know what the reception would be," he says, but nine dinners in, "we're still doing it."

Like many pop-up dining experiences, the menus at the Scrumptious Chef dinners rotate — soul food, heritage pig, Tex-Mex, wild game are just some of the themes he's assigned himself — to keep both the chef and customers interested.

Pop-ups thrive in the shadow of or perhaps in response to our 24/7 society where everything from television shows and news to deodorant and fried chicken is available anytime and anywhere we want it.

"With so many things being available and clear, it's nice to have something that's a surprise," Peters says.

The unexpected is more than nice, Keenan says — it's also part of a pop-up's success and what separates it from, say, a hot dog stand. "Sometimes they might run out of hot dogs, but there's nothing unexpected about what they are selling."

Customers are willing to forgo their expectations of a traditional dining or shopping experience for the possibility of participating in something that feels unique, and that excitement is both useful and potentially lucrative to business owners who are willing to go out on a limb.

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South by Southwest opens Friday with the film and interactive conferences and festivals. Look for special previews Thursday in Austin360 and Life & Style.

Check out more previews, interviews and news, plus live coverage later this week, at austin360.com.

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You and Barnes write about such elitist stuff! I daresay that 99.9% of the readership of the daily Statesman aren't interested. How you two keep your jobs is beyond me.



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Sounds to me like the downtown hipsters have a little too much time and money on their hands...

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