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'Secret Suppers': Thanks to Garbee, not so secret anymore

By Jayne Clark, USA TODAY

The latest twist in dining out is a hush-hush affair. These eateries have no sign. And they don't advertise. Still, the underground restaurant scene is growing, says Jenn Garbee, who has just written *Secret Suppers: Rogue Chefs & Underground Restaurants in Warehouses, Townhouses, Open Fields & Everywhere in Between* (Sasquatch Books, \$18.95). She estimates there are at least 100 such places nationwide, with new ones opening all the time. She talked to USA TODAY about secret suppers.

Q: In a nutshell, what are underground restaurants? Are they essentially dinner parties that strangers pay to attend?

A: They're something in between a dinner party and a supper club (in which members share the cost of dinners at rotating houses). The difference is the members aren't the same every time. There's a donation, but sometimes that doesn't cover anything but expenses. So it's sort of a paid dinner party — or like going to a restaurant where you don't know who's sitting next to you.

Q: What's the origin of the trend?

A: The classic dinner party is disappearing. Everyone's busy; people don't cook. Also, it's a way to meet people. They're as much about the socializing as they are about the food.

Q: How did you learn about the phenomenon?

A: I got an assignment from the *Los Angeles Times* about two and a half years ago to do a story on the Ghetto Gourmet, an underground restaurant in San Francisco that was in someone's attic. The more I got into it, the more (restaurants) I found.

Q: Where are they?

A: Mostly in big cities. New York has a lot. And San Francisco. There's even one in Des Moines. They can be harder to find in the South, though there's one in Atlanta and in Charleston.

Q: Since they're generally skirting tax and licensing regulations, most operate under the radar. How did you find them?

A: Most are Internet-driven, so I just Googled "underground restaurants" and "secret supper clubs." You can ask chefs, food folks or at farmers markets, and check out food blogs. I wanted to include different types in the book in terms of size and location and the reason the chef is doing it.

Q: Why are they doing it? Is it more about love of food or a way to make money?

A: They all started with a food sense. For instance, Supper Underground in Austin is run by a woman who loves to entertain. I went to one last week in L.A. run by a woman who has a corporate job but loves to cook. In D.C., Hush is run by young line cooks who work at top places but won't be able to do their own thing for years. So they invite friends and friends of friends and strangers.

Q: Can anyone get in, or are they targeted at twentysomething hipsters?

A: Most aren't large enterprises. Whisk & Ladle in Brooklyn got some publicity, and all of a sudden they had 500 people on their mailing list. The same thing happened in Austin. So now she does a lottery.

Q: Do you have to be a foodie to appreciate the underground restaurant experience?

A: No. But if you're not a risk taker by nature, you're not going to like most underground restaurants. You eat what they're serving — it's not like you can order off a menu.

Q: What do the tabs run?

A: From \$40 to \$180. I haven't seen many for less than \$40, which is a deal for a unique experience. Plus, there might be three or four wine pairings if it's not BYOB.

Q: Have you found the price has an inverse relationship to the enjoyability?

A: It can. There's a line between feeling like you're a guest vs. a customer. Some are really more like dinner parties. They'll have them once a month until it starts to become successful. Then the price goes up and when that happens, inspectors start sniffing around. Then maybe they get a catering license or they become a restaurant or they get shut down.

Q: So ultimately, they're apt to become a victim of their own success?

A: It's a complete Catch-22. Once they become successful, they lose some of the charm. When you're not making much money, no one cares. But when you start to make money, (competing) chefs care. And if someone gets sick (from the food), people care. My dad is a tax attorney, and my father-in-law is an accountant. There is no way I'd ever have an underground restaurant in my house.

TELL US: Have you eaten at an underground restaurant? What was your experience like?

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