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Kitchen Not So Confidential

Underground Restaurants Go Public, Lose Cachet; Too Many Drunk Diners

By HANNAH KARP
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Restaurants are so over. But so is the thrill of sneaking off to eat somewhere more hush-hush. From private supper clubs in cramped apartments to alfresco dinners on organic farms, underground restaurants have become the culinary world's worst-kept secret.

For years, these word-of-mouth eateries, many of them unlicensed, attracted diners looking to sample high-concept cuisine with an exclusive group of insiders. Often started by chefs who couldn't afford the overhead costs of a legal restaurant, they were also a reaction against the commercialism of celebrity chefs. Now, to build their operations and start making a profit, proprietors are embracing a new commercialism themselves. They're creating flashy Web sites, printing promotional brochures and loosening admissions requirements. The campaign's success has led to a new twist: The underground restaurants are drawing crowds, but they're alienating the same foodies they once sought to attract.

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David Paul Morris/Getty

The secret is out: Serving the first course at a Ghetto Gourmet dinner.

Gypsy in Seattle, which bills itself on its new site as "the hottest table in town," created an online application process open to the public last month. Would-be patrons formerly had to persuade a member to give up the club's email address to apply. Supper Underground, which holds dinners around Austin, Texas, recently hosted one at a conspicuous outlet: a local branch of the Whole Foods supermarket chain. The Paiza Club, a licensed Chinese restaurant hidden in the Venetian hotel in Las Vegas, used to limit entry to gamblers who wagered over half a million dollars a day. It started distributing hardcover ad brochures and this summer, it added nearly a dozen tables for gamblers who spend more than \$100,000 a day -- "the riffraff," says club manager Tonie Roberts.

Though she passed the screening process for Seattle's Gypsy, Lisa Preuss, a 33-year-old assistant to a cookbook writer, isn't planning on going -- especially after coming across the restaurant's new Web site. "Apparently it's not so secret anymore," says Ms. Preuss, who was also put off when she received an email instructing her to dress up for dinner, held at a private home.

But publicity pays the bills. The Ghetto Gourmet in Oakland, Calif., used to advertise only on craigslist under "miscellaneous romance" and passed around a hat for donations after dinner. It recently created a Web site where guests can make reservations and pay a \$30-to-\$60 set fee online. Founder Jeremy Townsend says the new process helps cut down on no-shows, who can cost a small operation hundreds of dollars. He's now making more than \$500 a dinner, after expenses, compared with the \$50 he was scraping up on a good night before he put up the reservation system last year.

More than 100 underground restaurants are estimated to be in operation in the U.S., and many are clamoring for attention at the risk of getting shut down. Although some have been closed after coming to the attention of authorities, health inspectors say a sting isn't worth their time if they haven't received a complaint.

Austin's Supper Underground, which began this spring in a cramped apartment with a dozen barefoot people, has doubled in size. Ghetto Gourmet is in the midst of hosting four dinners this week in New York; all sold out. Outstanding in the Field, which hosts ad hoc dinners cooked by widely known chefs across the country, had only 13 people at its first dinner seven years ago. Now, with thousands on the mailing list, founder Jim Denevan admits more than 100 people at each event. He's trying to be careful, though, after 160 showed up to a dinner in Bolinas, Calif., last year.

Asking for Wine

Amy Lee of San Francisco was expecting an intimate event when she and her husband showed up to a Ghetto Gourmet dinner, at someone's home, last month. She was surprised to find about 30 guests in the basement drinking martinis, as well as a camera crew

filming the "secret" event for an interactive cable channel. Ms. Lee, a 49-year-old engineering-company administrator, found herself yelling all night because of the noise, but the final straw came when other diners ran out of drinks and asked for some of her wine.

Shared tables and free-flowing wine are common at the gatherings, for better or worse. Sometimes attendees are told to bring their own, though at most events wine is provided. "It is a lot of liquor," says Debbie Keller, a 48-year-old tutor in Sacramento, Calif., who spent a recent evening at the Hidden Kitchen receiving parenting advice from the man sitting next to her. He had no children of his own, but after a few glasses, the mother of two thought it was "really great advice" by the time the tres leches cake was served.



A comedian entertains guests at a Ghetto Gourmet dinner in San Francisco.

Secret restaurants have long been popular overseas. Some of Hong Kong's most innovative food can be sampled at hidden spots in private homes or office buildings. Tourists tend to opt for Cuba's family-run, often illegal "paladares" over state-run restaurants, and European cities such as Paris and Prague boast notable culinary underbellies. In the U.S., underground dining traces back to the Prohibition era, when illegal, unmarked speakeasies offered black-market alcohol, along with food, live music and floor shows.

Michael Heberoy helped revive the trend in the U.S. when he started cooking dinner parties for friends in his Portland, Ore., living room seven years ago, after growing tired of formulaic restaurants. Soon, the email invite list grew to 15,000 people and the operation, known as Family Supper, received what Mr. Heberoy calls a "disgusting amount of press." Local authorities shut it down. He then opened, and has recently left, an acclaimed bistro called ClarkLewis.

Mr. Heberoy's latest projects include a book called "Kill the Restaurant" and One Pot, an underground restaurant in Seattle. He's not trying to keep this one quiet: The Web site went up this week. "At the end of the day, when you want to define yourself by your craft, you have to engage with consumer culture," he says.

But packing in the crowds sometimes means compromising food and service. Maggie Dutton fondly recalls one secret dining club several years ago, where a line cook served up a "spot-on" risotto in his parents' home. Since then, the event manager in Seattle says, she has attended a handful of disorganized dinners that had too much pretense and mediocre dishes. At one, the host ran out of plates. This fall, she posted on her food-and-wine blog: "Kill the Underground Restaurant."

Chicken Hearts

Despite the growing hype and crowds, underground dining can have benefits, especially for brave eaters, says Anthony Bourdain, a New York chef and the author of "Kitchen Confidential." At a recent dinner at Gypsy, he dined on several items that he says would not have made it onto the menu of a commercial restaurant: roasted chicken hearts, head cheese and fried marrow sticks, plus a

stinky, raw milk cheese (illegal in this country) that the chef had smuggled back from Paris in his son's diaper bag. "It's a chance for chefs early in their careers to really stretch and get creative," says Mr. Bourdain, who ordered extra marrow sticks.

Other diners have found the price is sometimes right. Tom Thornton says he wasn't fond of his experience on the underground New York scene after he and his wife attended one dinner for \$105 a person. But when the couple moved to Austin in January they decided to give Supper Underground a try -- the suggested donation was only \$45 a head, including wine. The smoked salmon and crème fraîche on wheat pancakes were "pretty good" and the "upper income, yuppie-ish" crowd was friendly, says the 31-year-old marketing executive. He has reserved a spot for this month online.



A meal hosted by Gypsy in Seattle.

Some places are still a challenge to find. Brooklyn, N.Y.-based Coach Peaches has a Web page, but there's no phone number or application -- only a link to a photograph of a raw pork chop. Shady's Café in tiny Penland, N.C., doesn't advertise its vegetarian, family-style dinners. In the Puget Sound, a former Seattle chef won't reveal any information about his island eatery, Cookhouse. Diners come purely by word-of-mouth eight times a month to feast on duck-fat pizza and berries with mascarpone, from the chef's own farm.

To find a secret restaurant, Mr. Hebberoy of One Pot suggests chatting up local chefs and vintners, and getting in touch with the owners of underground joints with Web sites to find others farther afield. Local performers and gallery owners are a good source of information as well, as many of the dinners incorporate entertainment from comedy to musical acts. Forums on sites such as Egullet and Epicurious are less helpful, because fans are often reluctant to expose their favorite illegal operations online. Chowhound removes any details on its boards and warns posters: "While we welcome all discussions that help folks find good chow, we cannot allow this discussion to continue with any specifics, as it will endanger these unlicensed restaurants."

Though her bimonthly operation was legal, April Langford, co-owner of Silverlake Winery in Los Angeles, would have appreciated a little more discretion from her guests. After someone leaked the phone number, email address and location of her coming Secret Restaurant gathering this spring to a local newspaper, she immediately canceled the dinner and permanently closed up shop.

"The whole point was for it to be secret," says Ms. Langford, who hosted only four dinners in a rented-out loft space. "If it gets printed in the L.A. Times, that's a sign that it's time to stop."

Spilling the Beans

There are a range of hidden and underground restaurants across the country -- some harder to get into than others. Here's a sampling of five.

RESTAURANT	PRICE	HOW TO GET IN	COMMENTS
Club 33 Anaheim, Calif.	Membership starts at \$4,500; annual fees are \$1,925 and up. Minimum food charge is \$59.	Write to Disneyland/ Attn: Club 33 /1313 S. Harbor Blvd. Anaheim, CA 92803	Walt Disney created this members-only restaurant (behind an unmarked green door in Disneyland's French Quarter) in 1967. Regulars say they go more for the ambiance -- and the fact that it's the only place in the park with a liquor license. Membership includes unlimited park access, but the waiting list is several years long.
One Pot Seattle	About \$35 a person	Request reservations at onepot.org ¹	In this new venture, owner Michael Heberoy will be serving dinners -- cooked in one pot -- in various locations in Seattle. Some will be open to the public and listed on the site, while others will be "deeply private and not listed anywhere."
Paiza Club Las Vegas, Nev.	Entrees range from \$16 to \$138	Become a big gambler -- or make friends with one	Tucked away on the 36th floor of the Venetian hotel, this two-year-old club specializes in Chinese cuisine and now lets in gamblers who wager more than \$100,000 daily. (Prices are listed on the menu, but most patrons eat free of charge.) Some dishes might be an acquired taste, like the \$98 papayas stuffed with real birds' nests.
Plate and Pitchfork Portland, Ore.	\$85 to \$135 per person, including wine	Buy tickets online at plateandpitchfork.com ²	Held on area farms, each five-course dinner begins with a wine-tasting reception with a guest vintner and a property tour. Meals are served family-style, but leave the kids at home -- site warns that the dinners are not suitable for children.
Sunday Dinner Chicago Chicago	\$55 for dinner	Hire the group to cater your party (email info@sundaydinnerchicago.com) ³	Run by three friends who met in culinary school, including a cook at Chicago's popular NAHA restaurant, this trio runs a legit catering company in addition to the monthly supper club. Email with catering requests only: The owners don't invite anyone they haven't met in person.

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