



## Click, then dine: Online reservation system catches on

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Scribbled waiting lists and wipe-board seating charts have gone the way of the stone and chisel at some Omaha restaurants.

So have no-reservations policies and heavy reliance on the imperfect memory of the maitre d'.

In their place: a computerized restaurant reservations network and table-tracking system called OpenTable.

Launched in San Francisco in 1998 and widely known among travelers and administrative assistants, OpenTable offers reservations for more than 9,500 restaurants worldwide.

Where it has caught on, it is big: More than 1,100 restaurants in the New York City area and about 785 in the San Francisco Bay area are OpenTable members.

But OpenTable is just beginning to find a following in Nebraska.

The Melting Pot at Village Pointe was the first Omaha restaurant to sign up — back in 2005.

Spezia signed on this May. The Upstream Brewing Co.'s Old Market and Legacy locations joined in mid-October.

And V. Mertz added the system Tuesday, bringing the number of OpenTable restaurants in Omaha to 10.

For diners, OpenTable functions a bit like a maitre d' — the sort who has a bird's-eye view of the dining room, remembers everything and is accessible to diners and staff at all hours.

With a few keystrokes, it can tell you whether and when tables are available at a given restaurant on a given date. With a click, it can confirm your reservation.

It can log and discreetly relay special requests ("booth preferred" or "allergic to shellfish") and special occasions ("25th wedding anniversary") as well as details noted by servers, managers and sommeliers on your previous visits ("no ice in the water glass," "good tipper," "likes pinot noirs").

"That's one of my favorite advantages," said Felicity Turco, dining room manager at Spezia. "It tracks people's table preferences, server preferences, even food preferences. Before, you had to keep that all in your head."

Ginny Fallon used OpenTable when working at a restaurant in Chicago and advocated to add it at Upstream after she became general manager of its Old Market location.

"The Omaha market's not really that aware of OpenTable yet," she said. "But in Chicago, if you want to make a reservation, that's what you do."

Fallon said adding the system means that Upstream can accept reservations for parties of any size at lunch and parties of less than eight at dinner. Previously, it took reservations for large parties only, at limited times.

The system keeps closer tabs on the progress of diners, Fallon said, allowing the host to offer more precise wait estimates for those without reservations.

It also gives Fallon real-time data on restaurant crowds. She can use that later to adjust future staffing. And she can monitor the dining room from her laptop at home or her office downstairs.

"If it looks like it's starting to get busy, I can go up and help."

Matt Stamp, general manager at V. Mertz, said he saw the system in practice when apprenticing with a master sommelier at a restaurant in Boulder, Colo., this fall.

"I could immediately see the capabilities," he said.

Joining the network should help promote V. Mertz online, offer convenience to travelers and others, and help the restaurant better tailor the experiences of its diners, he said.

"Guests, even infrequent diners, can feel confident that their particular needs and recurring special requests will always be noted and met," Stamp said.

The restaurant also gains an easy means to improve its relationship with diners, he said, "whether that means sending a short e-mail to inquire about their recent experience here, or sending all of our vegetarian customers a quick note alerting them to a new vegetarian dish."

OpenTable also rewards good dining habits. Diners who honor their reservations get points toward free food vouchers. Diners who fail to either honor or cancel reservations get warning e-mails and, after four no-shows in a year, deactivated accounts.

Michael Berch — an attorney and consultant who grew up in California and now divides his time between Lincoln and Pleasanton, Calif. — estimates that he's made more than 80 reservations through OpenTable in the last eight years. He uses it mostly when he's in the Bay area or traveling to places like New York.

"I absolutely love OpenTable," he said. "For me, it takes all the negatives out of reservation-making: phone voice menus, flaky or rude receptionists or maitre d's, errors in taking down information, uncertainty or lack of confidence in calling. And it shows you all the available times, so you don't have to ask: 'OK, then would 8:15 be OK? 8:30? Maybe 8:45?'"

Berch said it also seems to democratize access: "VIPs and friends of the owners will always call and get better service, but everyone else (using OpenTable) is on the same footing."

He uses it mainly for tables of two or four at mid-to-upper-level, nonchain restaurants. He has found that the most exclusive restaurants that participate offer only a token number of tables on OpenTable. And lower-end, chain and ethnic restaurants don't usually accept reservations.

Steve Trusty, a 66-year-old Council Bluffs writer and consultant, used OpenTable when traveling two years ago but didn't know it was available in Omaha and wasn't sure he'd use it much locally. If reservations are necessary, he said, "I just use the phone."

Shannon Warner, a 30-year-old who works at Gallup in Omaha and sometimes has to schedule business luncheons, said she hadn't heard of OpenTable until recently.

After peeking at the site, she signed up and said she'd use it but added: "A lot more restaurants need to be available on the site for it to really take off."

Therein lies the crux — OpenTable needs a critical mass of restaurants and registered diners to make it viable for either party. And the ongoing fees can add up for restaurants that join before many local diners learn about the service.

Firebirds Wood Fired Grill joined OpenTable last year but dropped out last month. Its corporate headquarters didn't return a call inquiring about the reason, but local staff said OpenTable didn't generate many reservations.

OpenTable spokeswoman Shannon Stubo said the company is making a push to enlist more restaurants in the area.

"We have always seen a great deal of potential in the Omaha and Des Moines markets," she said, "mostly because there is healthy demand from diners interested in good food and because they are both destination cities for travelers."