



Go online to dine - Part II

Honolulu Star Bulletin

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By Katherine Nichols

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Web reservations get rave reviews from restaurants

When you go online to make a dining reservation at OpenTable.com, you can specify the city and time, or even search for a certain type of cuisine. The site will display all restaurants (registered with the company, of course) with seating available.

The site also asks for personal information, which the restaurants keep on record to better serve you when you arrive. Within seconds, your reservation is confirmed -- at any time of the day or night. No wasted minutes on hold, no multiple calls when your first choice is unavailable.

"When I decided to subscribe to OpenTable it was mostly because I liked the history of the customer," said chef George Mavrothalassitis, whose restaurant, Chef Mavro, was the fifth in Hawaii to enroll with OpenTable.com. (His new restaurant, Cassis, also is on board.)

"We know that it's your anniversary. Or that you don't like white wine. Or you are allergic to nuts. To me it's a win-win situation."

Mavrothalassitis believes the site tends to attract more upscale, sophisticated diners, and his statistics indicate a 25 percent increase in out-of-state visitors making reservations online.

When a restaurant signs on with OpenTable.com, a representative comes and sets up the computer system at the restaurant, and trains the staff in how to use it. The company charges restaurants \$1 per person for every reservation made through the Web site.

"It's worth every penny," Mavrothalassitis said.

Patrons also benefit, through the site's Dining Rewards Program, which allows restaurant-goers to earn points each time they dine out using OpenTable.com. When they accumulate 2,000 points, those points can be redeemed for an OpenTable Dining Cheque worth \$20, as good as cash at any member restaurant.

Another benefit for both sides is that cancellations are completed with a simple click -- processed in real time for the restaurant.

Town in Kaimuki has used the system for about six months. "Most of our customers call us directly, but we do get a few Web reservations every night," said assistant manager Jemma Spillner. Most of those are people from the mainland -- primarily San Francisco, where OpenTable.com is already a way of life. "They plan their vacation and book online so they know where they're eating on those nights," she said.

"So far, I do believe it's been worth it," Spillner said of the \$1 charge per person. "It's an entire organizational system, as well as a referral system from their Web page."

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