



## Before the Entrees, Apps to Winnow Choices and Find Seats

### The New York Times

Smartphones have made it simple to find a restaurant at the last minute. The gastronomic triumvirate of Urbanspoon, Yelp and OpenTable each have well-designed mobile apps for Android, BlackBerry and iPhone users, and they're all free.

For a reservation, though, there once was pretty much just one choice: OpenTable. It can be a lifesaver when you call a restaurant on the road, only to be told that OpenTable is the only way to reserve. (Crazy but true.)

Some restaurants, smaller ones in particular, balk at OpenTable's equipment and service fees, though, so the selection can sometimes fall short.

More choices are on the horizon. Urbanspoon, which made a name for itself with an ingenious iPhone app that greatly simplified a restaurant search, late last year offered restaurants mobile apps for taking reservations more cheaply than on OpenTable.

Urbanspoon followed up recently with an iPad app that may be easier for restaurant personnel to use than the iPhone app, and now the company says it is quickly ramping up the number of restaurants that offer reservations to mobile and online users.

Urbanspoon said it had signed up 100 restaurants in Seattle and 50 in Los Angeles, its first two test markets, and in recent days the first New York restaurants had signed up, including Snack Taverna, Bar Breton and Il Gattopardo, among others.

But Urbanspoon's reservation feature still has a long way to go before it is useful — New Yorkers have, by some counts, around 28,000 restaurants to choose from. Still, on future restaurant searches it will be worth looking for the "Rez" icon. It might save the trouble of tapping over to the OpenTable app to book.

Then again, OpenTable has its own restaurant search. The service covers 13,000 restaurants in the United States and in five foreign countries, and its reviews are better than those on Yelp and Urbanspoon.

Before we get to that, it's worth noting that the review format will be familiar to people, if a bit scrunched and slightly more fragmented than on a computer. Users set a preferred dining time and the size of their party, and the service presents options that fit those preferences.

For smartphone users with GPS-enabled devices, the app will show available tables locally, which is a helpful time-saving feature.

OpenTable's new iPad app also makes use of GPS and takes advantage of a display big enough to show lots of information and a touch-screen interface that flies.

As fun as it is to flick through a big list of dining spots quickly, the information is worth savoring. Reviews for the Harrison, a popular restaurant in the TriBeCa section of New York that opened in 2001, include the restaurant's own brief description and parking suggestions, as well as a button for viewing the establishment on a map. The "menu" button looked promising, but yielded a blank page. (OpenTable said that was because the restaurant used Flash technology for its menu, which the iPad does not support.)

More than 200 reviewers had rated the Harrison (with four stars out of five, by the way), for food, ambience and service. The noise level was also noted.

Most important, reviews are stamped with the date of a reviewer's visit, so users can tell if the establishment is starting to slide. And only those who have been seated at the restaurant through an OpenTable reservation can follow up with a review, so competitors would have to spend a decent sum to manipulate reviews. It's a trick that no other restaurant review service can claim.

The only thing keeping OpenTable from monopolizing the review-and-reserve process is its occasional lack of coverage. I tried to find 12 recent recommendations from friends in Manhattan on OpenTable, but the service missed three (I Coppi, Txikito and Raoul's), and not every restaurant accepts reservations, online or otherwise.

Urbanspoon's mobile app got them all, and unlike OpenTable, the app included published reviews from The New York Post,

Gayot and Time Out New York, among other publications, as well as reviews from more than 100 food bloggers in New York alone. The user reviews were helpful, too, although less trustworthy than those on OpenTable.

Urbanspoon's cleverest feature continues to be "Shake," which offers suggestions. The first column of results lists nearby locations, the second column lists food types and the third lists pricing categories. I shook my iPhone and, serendipitously, it pointed me to Shake Shack, in the Gramercy section of Manhattan, for inexpensive burgers.

Users can also lock one or two of the attributes — say "Brazilian" for food type. For phones without a motion sensor, pressing a button will scramble the results.

iPad owners get a bonus, again, since they can pinch and zoom on a big area map and see all the recommended places at a glance, then select one for details. One major caveat: these apps will not work without a Wi-Fi or 3G data connection.

Yelp had fewer reviews of the restaurants on my list, and it wasn't as easy or fun to use as the competing apps. But the app is, like the online service, much more comprehensive than the others, covering as many business categories as one would find in most yellow pages books.

These services have lots of competition from the mobile apps of Zagat, Michelin and others. But those cost money. Zagat to Go (\$10 a year) compiles the content of more than 45 restaurant guides, and it works on- and offline. The Michelin Guide Restaurants Europe app (\$19 for iPhones), is another option for serious eaters.

Even for gourmets and gourmands, though, it's hard to compete with free. And if the competition between OpenTable and Urbanspoon blossoms into something meaningful, the free apps will be an even tougher pair to beat.

#### Quick Calls

Android users can now use Slingbox to connect to their home cable TV service and watch live shows on their phone. The Slingplayer for Android costs \$30, and it requires Slingbox hardware for the home, for \$180 to \$300. ... Smule's "I Am T-Pain" app (\$3 for iPhone) gets a boost from the new iPhone's video capabilities and front-facing camera. Now users can shoot music videos and the app will auto-tune the voices. ... Drinking games have made it to the iPad. With iQuarters (\$2, for iPad and iPhone), users get 40 virtual coins to bounce through an array of shot-glass challenges. Beer not included.