

Restaurant 101: Reservations or not?

BY DON DICKSTEIN
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As a restaurant owner, I always ask myself why everyone in the world decides to go out for dinner on Saturday nights at 7:30 p.m. That would be absolutely great if we had 300 tables!

Unfortunately, most restaurants today have limited seating, and it's tough to accommodate everyone at once. Many New York and metropolitan restaurants have their own solution to that problem: They merely say that tables are

available before 6:30 p.m., or after 10:30 p.m. By doing this, they fill their ordinarily void tables during off hours, and they save the prime time tables for regular customers who frequent their establishment often.

Other restaurateurs have another solution. They accept any and every reservation that comes in. Once a patron has a reservation, restaurants believe that their customers will wait as long as necessary. I find that a great way to make everyone unhappy.

But, there's the other side of the coin. Restaurants have a very tough time taking reservations on busy nights. All too often, guests show up 20 to 30 minutes late for a reservation, with no phone call alerting the restaurant of their

delay. Almost everybody has a cell phone today, but people choose not to call ahead. When they show up late, they take it for granted that the table will be waiting, with no concern for the people with a reservation after them.

Many people also appear with far fewer guests in their party than the reservation was made for, leaving the restaurant with empty seats or tables. Restaurants around the country are now asking for credit card deposits on reservations. It seems drastic, but it's becoming more necessary than ever.

Here's yet another dilemma. It

is standard for people without reservations to appear on a busy night and ask what the wait time is, and then to become quite irate if the time is longer than expected. I don't blame them, within reason. The waiting time is an estimate, but it is very hard to anticipate that people at an existing table might decide to have another cup of coffee, or an after dinner drink. There are also many instances in which guests have paid their check, and decide to hang at the table for an additional 15 minutes or more.

So, what's the bottom line? Restaurants have to be more care-

ful in their booking, and customers have to be more aware of the challenges faced by the restaurateur.

My favorite question from patrons on a Saturday night at 7:30 p.m. is, "Is there a wait?"

My answer: "Do you really want to dine in a restaurant that isn't busy on a Saturday night?"

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