

Kitchen confidential

The insiders' guide to scoring restaurant reservations



Those impossible-to-get reservations? Not so impossible – if you're in the know. **Naomi Chrisoulakis** sweet-talked concierges, proprietors and critics into spilling their secrets to *CNT Middle East*

Illustration **Chris Long**

From Michelin-starred establishments to hole-in-the-wall icons, there are some restaurants in the world that are renowned for their reservation policies – or lack thereof. Unlike in the Middle East, where dining at an A-list eatery is still merely a matter of remembering to call the week before, the chances of scoring a table at places like Spain's El Celler de Can Roca, London's Dinner by Heston Blumenthal or New York's Per Se are slim to none unless you have months to plan ahead. So if you're unexpectedly in the same city as the world's best dishes, how can you ensure you get the service you've come to expect? "There's always a way to get a table," says Raphael Pallais, Chief Concierge at The Plaza Hotel in New York. "All is fair in love, war and making restaurant reservations."

For hotel concierges like Pallais, who make reservations for guests every day, the key to success is personal connection. "Our first line of attack is to develop long-

standing relationships with maître d's, chefs, reservationists and managers," he says. "This doesn't happen overnight, or even in six months. It's a long-term strategy of concerted cultivation of relationships with people who can get you that impossible table." Lorena Ringoot, The Surrey NYC's Chief Concierge, agrees. "I've been a concierge for 27 years, and I've known restaurateurs from the time they were waiters. It means that I can text or Facebook them, and they'll sometimes put an extra table on for me." So unless you've got David Chang among your Facebook friends, your best bet is to strike the right chord with your concierge.

Not staying at a hotel? Credit card and luxury concierge services can offer an in. "You may call a restaurant, and they'll say it's booked, but when we call they'll find us something," says Steve Edo, CEO of Montreal-based premium travel and concierge company, Pure Entertainment. "The concierge can negotiate what you can't. Just two days ▶

ago we got a call from someone in Russia who wanted to go to Dinner by Heston Blumenthal. He called on Tuesday and wanted to go on Thursday. We made it happen.”

But you don't always need a third party to get you a place at the table. Sometimes it's just a matter of working the system. “When my wife wanted to book me in to Yves Camdeborde's very-hard-to-get-into Le Comptoir in Paris for my birthday, she sneakily booked accommodation at Madame Camdeborde's charming Relais Saint-Germain Hotel, which houses the bistro. And which offers a table to all its guests,” says Terry Durack, the *Sydney Morning Herald's* restaurant critic. “At Joel Robuchon's L'Atelier in Paris, if you walked in the front door of the restaurant, you joined the non-bookings queue. But if you entered the hotel [Pont Royal], and then entered the restaurant from the lobby, staff would assume you were a hotel guest and prioritise you. The lesson: if the restaurant is within a hotel, use the hotel to get you a seat in the restaurant.”

And there's no rule saying you can't try your luck at the last minute. Even tiny, heavily booked Osteria Francescana, which scored third place this year in the World's 50 Best Restaurants list, sometimes has tables suddenly free up. “I would never exclude calling last minute. Last-minute cancellations happen and so do last-minute bookings,” says co-owner Lara Gilmore. “Another suggestion is to put yourself on our waiting list. Our cancellation policy at the restaurant asks guests to confirm the table by phone 48 hours in advance. If we do not hear from our reserved tables either to confirm or cancel within 24 hours, we begin calling our waiting list to fill in the cancellations.”

All waiting lists are not created equal, however. “There are secret waiting lists and hierarchies on those lists,” reveals Pallais. “People who have a relationship with the restaurant go to the top. Spend a lot – \$8,000 to \$10,000 (AED 30,000 to AED 36,000), with the best grape – and you'll go to the top next time you try and book. The restaurant keeps a list of big spenders, and the maître d' will offer a drink at the end of the dinner, with his personal card.”

Even if you haven't dropped that kind of cash on a previous visit, charm can take you places a platinum credit card can't. “It is possible to charm your way to what you need,” says Pallais. “We send flowers to



DINING BY NUMBERS

1 million+
People who request a table at Noma each year

25
The courses on the set menu at Germany's tough-to-get-into Vendome restaurant

12 million
The hits El Celler de Can Roca's website got the day after it was named World's Best Restaurant

2,600
The calls one food blogger made in an attempt to get a table at Thomas Keller's The French Laundry

“THERE ARE HIERARCHIES ON WAITING LISTS. THE RESTAURANT KEEPS A LIST OF BIG SPENDERS, AND THE MAÎTRE D' WILL OFFER A DRINK AT THE END OF THE DINNER, WITH HIS PERSONAL CARD

“reservatonists, we invite them for bubbles and even to our personal parties.” Bribery, on the other hand, won't get you far. “It doesn't work and it's in bad taste – so is a ‘Don't you know who I am?’ attitude,” says Amanda Tomasello, restaurant specialist for luxury concierge service Quintessentially. “You get more with honey than you do with vinegar: it's all about being polite, following up and being patient. There is a good chance there'll be a

cancellation, and if you're the nice person who they spoke to and not the one being entitled and obnoxious, you'll get it."

If you were organised enough to put your name on the waiting list before you left home, take your cue from the pros and follow up – at the right time. "Generally in New York, restaurants reconfirm their reservations at 4pm and let the table go by 5pm – so I'll call them at 4.30 to check," says The Surrey's Ringoot. Find out your chosen restaurant's cancellation policy, and

be persistent – but not as persistent as one would-be diner at Osteria Francescana, who called six times and sent 10 emails requesting a table for a Friday night seating. "As there wasn't a table available, he had his hotel call three times as well," says Gilmore. "If that wasn't enough, his Italian colleague called half an hour later begging us to find a table. The best we could do was put him on the waiting list. These situations always make you feel uncomfortable because of course we'd love to be able to seat everyone who calls."

And an uncomfortable reservationist

isn't an accommodating reservationist. Do, however, keep an eye on Twitter; both Copenhagen's Noma and Melbourne's Attica have taken to social media in the past to fill last-minute cancellations.

If all else fails, just show up. "Most restaurants will seat walk-ins at the bar," says Durack. "Luckily, I adore dining at the bar or counter, so I've eaten in some of the world's best restaurants that way." Adds Tomasello, "The easiest way to become a VIP, honestly, is to just go, have a drink or meal at the bar and be nice." **CNT**

TOUGH TABLES

With a slew of accolades, rave reviews and Michelin stars, these are the in-demand restaurants every serious diner wants a seat at



OSTERIA FRANCESCANA, MODENA, ITALY

Climbing to third on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list, this three-Michelin-star, 12-table favourite is known for its artistic yet eccentric menu.

Waiting list: 3 months

Head chef:

Massimo Bottura

Signature dish:

The Classics Tasting Menu, featuring five ages of Parmigiano-Reggiano in different textures and temperatures, foie gras crunch and lemon tart.

AED 740

0039-05-921 0118,
osteriafrancescana.it



ELEVEN MADISON PARK, NEW YORK

A member of the esteemed Seven Star Club (three Michelin stars, plus four *New York Times* stars), this Madison Avenue eatery blends Modern French cuisine with a Manhattan twist.

Waiting list:

200 per night

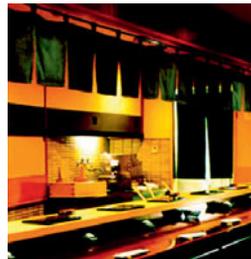
Head chef:

Daniel Humm

Tasting menu: Up to 19 courses including the signature honey-lavender roasted duck, and the beef, which has been dry-aged for 140 days.

AED 826.

001-212-889 0905,
elevenmadisonpark.com



SUKIYABASHI JIRO, TOKYO

It's all about who you know at this 10-seat, three-Michelin-star sushi bar. Impossible to get into without a local host, the restaurant and 87-year-old chef-owner Jiro Ono were the subjects of a critically acclaimed documentary.

Waiting list:

Reservations are taken on the 1st of the month for the following month and book up instantly.

Head chef: Jiro Ono

Tasting menu: 19 pieces of sushi, served one by one, followed by a slice of melon for digestion, AED 1,120.

0081-3-3535 3600



DINNER BY HESTON BLUMENTHAL, LONDON

Overlooking Hyde Park, Heston Blumenthal's latest venture earned its second Michelin star this year (a sixth for Heston) and specialises in reviving historical British dishes from as far back as the 14th century.

Waiting list: 3 months

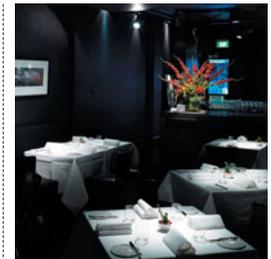
Head chef: Ashley Palmer-Watts

Signature dish:

Meat Fruit (c.1500): Mandarin, chicken liver & foie gras parfait with grilled bread, to start,

AED 97.

0044-207-201 3833,
dinnerbyheston.com



ATTICA, MELBOURNE

Focusing on local and seasonal ingredients, the New Zealand-born chef at Australasia's #1 restaurant often rises before dawn to forage at the shore or in Attica's own garden for raw materials for his natural Antipodean recipes.

Waiting list: 5 months

Head chef:

Ben Shewry

Tasting menu: Eight courses, including potato cooked in the earth in which it was grown, and Flinders Island wallaby, with matching grape,

AED 1,000.

0061-395-30 0111,
attica.com.au

WORDS: JENNY KING; PHOTOS: PAOLO TERZI, FRANCESCO TONELLI, COURTESY OF THE MANDARIN ORIENTAL HOTEL