

How to land a reservation at the United States' most fashionable restaurants

by Paul Sullivan

It's a beautiful Saturday evening and you want to go out to a hot new restaurant, maybe splurge on one of those grand Michelin three-star restaurants in New York.

Don't slip the maître d' a \$US100 bill if you actually want to get into one of them in prime time. You're too late. The tables are all committed, and even if one could be found, it's reserved for people like Beyoncé and Jay Z.

You may have better luck if you settle for an off-hour reservation, say at 5:30pm - great if you have children - or 10:30pm, if you're not famished by then.

So what's the secret for someone who's affluent and interested in being seen - and maybe sampling the food - at the trendiest restaurants in New York, Los Angeles and Miami? Success at the game often entails calling in all sorts of favours.

Actress and socialite Cassandra Seidenfeld, for example, said she usually relies on her politeness and reputation for being a generous tipper to get into a New York restaurant the moment it opens. But when the Polo Bar, Ralph Lauren's trendy, exclusive restaurant, opened in January, she couldn't get a table.

"I'd call and they'd say 'We have a waiting list that lasts months,'" Seidenfeld said. "No one in New York wants to wait months. I had friends who were posting that they were in the restaurant, which made me ballistic."

She mentioned her frustration to her personal shopper at Ralph Lauren on Fifth Avenue, around the corner from the restaurant, and he offered to call on her behalf. A day later, she was dining there with a friend.

"I was shocked by the power of my personal shopper," she said.

SOFT POWER OVER HARD TACTICS

People who have success at the table game will say this: Getting in takes money, for sure, but it's more about soft power than hard tactics.

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For starters, adjust your expectations. Everyone wants to have lunch at 12:30pm and dinner on a Saturday at 8pm. Chances are the other diners calling are just as affluent, willing to spend and unknown as you.

But even hip restaurants need to pay the bills, and that means early and late seatings for the non-A-list crowd. Michael Ridard, partner at Bâoli, a fashionable Miami Beach restaurant, said someone who wanted to eat at his restaurant should aim for 7pm and forget trying to get a 9:30pm reservation, when the restaurant will be filled with A-listers and a disc jockey spinning music.

Jason Apfelbaum, whose Manhattan restaurant Sushi Roxx just opened, said he planned to have two reservation times, but guests would be seated in different areas within the restaurant. While he said the average affluent person had no chance of getting one of the 14 seats at the centre of the restaurant, which will feature a Tokyo-style cabaret, there are 58 additional seats in the main room and 53 more in a lounge (in other words, the less cool area).

Abraham Merchant, president and chief executive of Merchants Hospitality, said he typically held a private room at his restaurant Philippe in Manhattan for celebrity clients but would open it up to diners who commit to ordering an expensive wine or spending well on the meal.

"Sometimes, people will order a bottle of Château Lafite ahead of time - you'll get the room then," he said. "If they're going to spend \$US10,000, we'll give them the room."

This may seem to be over the top just for the privilege of spending a lot of money on dinner. But Herb Karlitz, who runs Karlitz & Co, a marketing firm geared toward the food industry, said diners frustrated by this process should get to know the person who can wave them in. It's rarely that one answering the phone and offering the 5:30pm reservation.

"If it sounds like a young kid who's just a robot, ask to speak to the general manager and be honest and say, 'Here's my situation,'" Karlitz said. "That probably works a third of the time, which isn't the greatest odds, but it's a third better than you had before."

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'I SAW ONE RESERVATION GO FOR \$US20,000'

Small restaurants are particularly problematic. The most difficult reservation to get in New York may still be Rao's, the East Harlem Italian restaurant that has been around for more than a century and is not even open on Saturday. It only has so many tables and a lot of regulars, so getting in is notoriously difficult.

Karlitz said he frequently fielded requests from people seeking his help. His suggestion is to find one of the charities supported by the family that owns Rao's and to bid on a reservation.

"I saw one reservation go for \$US20,000," he said. "And you're still paying for dinner. It's crazy."

(The replica of Rao's inside Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas isn't East Harlem, but it's a lot easier to get in for a taste of the restaurant's famous lemon chicken.)

Apfelbaum, who has been in the restaurant business for two decades, said there were certain tricks he used when he was on the other side of the phone to edge his reservation closer to the golden hour.

"Sometimes, I'll pretend I'm a concierge and say 'I have guests who are staying in the presidential suite, and they just flew in from London and they're requesting a prime table at 8pm,'" he said. "I've almost always gotten a reservation."

He also created an alter ego for dining, Jason Maxwell. (He said Maxwell was an easier last name to spell.) He is always a big tipper and courteous, he said, knowing that those attributes will end up in the notes that restaurants keep on people.

(But he is aiming to thwart people from trying similar tricks with his restaurant. His reservationist will be checking to make sure people are who they say they are by taking credit cards for reservations, doing Internet searches to verify credentials and claims and checking their social media following to determine where they will sit.)

THE POWER OF THE CONCIERGE

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For most people, pretending to be a concierge may be a stretch. But such a trick acknowledges the power they wield to fill a restaurant. They are sending scores of hungry guests to restaurants every night.

While concierges may often get a table when others fail, they acknowledge they can do more with more time.

"With my regular guests, I will frequently mention to them, if you're going to be here next month or in three weeks perhaps we can make a reservation for you now to get in" a desired restaurant, said Michael Romei, chief concierge at the Towers of the Waldorf Astoria, where he has worked for 22 years. "The longer time frame we have, the better the chances are of getting someone in."

There are, of course, tactics on the ethical edge. Karlitz said his parents used to pretend they had a reservation and shame the maitre d' into seating them. Today, he said, that trick "probably works one out of 10 times, but it's just not the right thing to do."

There is also an underground network of concierges who, like ticket scalpers, resell reservations they secure for as much as \$US200 a person.

Spiro Menegatos, an owner of Nerai, a power-lunch spot, said non-regulars often take an 11:30am reservation and arrive late in the hope of eating closer to 12:30pm. Other couples will split up their party to keep it below seven people, which requires a credit card, to be charged in case the party doesn't show up.

He suspects one couple is trying to do that this weekend: a man and a woman with the same last name each made reservations for four people. "Right now, we've put one downstairs and one upstairs," Menegatos said. "When we call to confirm, we're going to ask. If it's really busy, it's going to be difficult to seat them together."

The best if most labor-intensive way to get in may be the old-fashioned strategy used by Barry Weintraub, a plastic surgeon in Manhattan and the Hamptons: He calls in favours.

One way is to phone the concierge at the Pierre Hotel, where many of his patients stay. The concierge then calls the restaurant and makes Weintraub's standing as a fine diner known - among his bona fides are that he has no problem spending \$US2000 to \$US3000 on a dinner for four; he is a gracious guest; and he tips well above 20 per cent.

"They often have access that a civilian, even a plastic surgeon, might not have," Weintraub said.

But if he wants to go back, he knows what that entails. "You take care of the maitre d'," he said. "Everyone is working. If you understand that and enjoy the experience, it's great all around."