



The fussy eater

Ariel Leve

Not taking bookings is fashionable but I have reservations about spending all night in a queue

When did booking a table become a part-time job? There's reserving online, then confirming online, then a dozen emails confirming your confirmation, then there's the phone call where the restaurant leaves a message insisting you call back – by the time I've secured the table I'm too exhausted to go to dinner. But then I'm too scared to cancel either for fear I'll end up on a blacklist. No wonder so many people are buying sandwiches and eating on the street.

But despite the hassle of making a booking, I'd still choose that over a walk-in and taking the chance of waiting around. Lately it seems that the no-reservations policy has become alarmingly prevalent. Sometimes it's stated on the restaurant website. Or it's mentioned in a review. But the worst is when it's over the phone. It's such a letdown. I'll ring the restaurant up and the person at the other end will deliver the news in a smug, bored tone. "We don't take bookings."

"What? Why not? Not at all?" I'll ask, just in case there's a misunderstanding. There never is. Sometimes they'll



respond that they take bookings, but only for parties of eight or more. That would be great – if I didn't want to have an enjoyable dinner.

I understand it at an inexpensive or an exceptionally small restaurant. But now if a place is popular, owners know they can make more money on first-come-first-served, and so no matter what the size, they refuse to hold tables. The no-booking policy makes sense for the owner. But why should I have to wait an hour and a half for a kale salad? It's not like there aren't 10,000 other places serving kale salad.

My friend Carrie points out that people enjoy waiting for things that are not readily available to everyone. "I understand waiting for a sample sale to open or if you are 13 and waiting

for tickets – but waiting for food? It's very Dickensian."

Not that she isn't willing to take a step back in time. She's been known to queue for hours to get in to a place on the Lower East Side that serves omelettes. People will wait for hours – outside – to sit elbow-to-elbow with strangers and you can't talk because it's too loud. All for what? An egg. How good can it be?

The no-reservations policy also brings out the worst in people. There are two types of diners. The considerate ones who are aware that there is a long line of hungry patrons waiting to get a table. They pay the bill swiftly when they are done eating and depart. Then there is the other type – the entitled ones who remain stubbornly chatting away, lingering at the table, refusing to be rushed or hassled. Only when the waiter or waitress asks them to leave do they reluctantly move for their wallet in slow motion. They are immune to dirty looks.

I don't mind waiting 10 or 15 minutes. Twenty if I have a book or I'm with someone I like talking to. Anything more than that and I start to wonder how much longer I'll give it before I leave. Then I consider how much I've already invested. I'll usually stick it out, but the whole time I'm anxious, and it takes all the pleasure out of going out for a meal. Although, some would argue, by the time you actually eat, you're so grateful and famished everything tastes good. **OFM** ariel.leve@observer.co.uk

Why wait in line for an omelette? It's an egg. How good can it be?

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Country Life Great British Picnics

What is it? Something useful now the sun is threatening to come out. Opening with an image of a flower-strewn meadow, Country Life are flogging a slightly idealised version of the British picnic to go with their butter. There's no mention of what to do should the local attack dog take a liking to your sausage rolls. Also: why no tips from ex-Sex Pistol and famous Country Life fan John Lydon? Free, for iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad.

Key ingredient? Much better than its corporate sponsorship might suggest. There's a thorough location map of Britain, covering most pretty picnic destinations. (You can also add and share your own favourites.) The selection of recipes is also fairly respectable and aware of its audience, so includes cheese and onion pasties alongside the usual array of broad bean and bulgur wheat salads.

What about the really important stuff? You mean the weather? You can link through to a localised forecast. Perfect.

THE PIE CHART

This month: deluxe fast food



Kobe beef and lobster burger
Le Burger Brasserie, Las Vegas

£475

Golden Opulence Sundae
Serendipity 3, New York

£611



The Don of all Doners
Milk-fed, lamb kebab, Stockwell

£750