

Restaurants on the Fringe, and Thriving

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March 12, 2003

SAN FRANCISCO

IT was 9 o'clock on a Friday night at Mamasan's Bistro in the Mission District and the food was running a little late, but no one seemed to mind. Two dozen diners perched on folding chairs, listening to a hip-hop D.J. spin classic De La Soul in the glow of the Christmas lights dangling overhead. The restaurant's proprietor, a willowy 37-year-old woman who would reveal only her first name, Lynette, was in the kitchen placidly doctoring coconut yams on her crowded four-burner stove.

"This place has become my second home," said Carlos Castille, an artist, as he sipped a coconut-mango cocktail. "There's a comfort to it. It's so mellow. I've brought all my friends."

But securing a seat at Mamasan's is not easy. The restaurant, which also happens to be Lynette's apartment, has no sign, and the only way you will ever find it is if someone tells you where it is (a quiet street, a hidden door, up a dark stairwell to the top apartment). Even then, you can't just show up: you must have an invitation. To get one you need an introduction from a previous guest. This may seem as if it's a complicated way to get a plate of grilled salmon, but Mamasan's Bistro is not a legal endeavor. Its kitchen lacks the certificates, permits and inspections required by the city of San Francisco. And although the coconut-mango cocktails flowed, Lynette does not have a liquor license.

Mamasan's is not, however, an anomaly. Restaurants of dubious legality, where food is cooked in apartments and backyards, abound across the United States. These underground restaurants range from upscale to gritty, and are born from youthful idealism, ethnic tradition or economic necessity. They lack certification from any government agency and are, strictly speaking, against the law. You dine in them at your own risk. If you can find them.

Over the last four years, Lynette said, more than a thousand customers have come through her doors to eat pungent Chamorran dishes from Guam, where she was raised in the local Chamorro culture. She cooks them with her 61-year-old mother, the Mamasan of the restaurant's name.

"I've worked at restaurants for years, and dealing with the public is a beast," Lynette said. "You don't get to edit who comes into your space, and it becomes a very sterile exchange of goods. I like knowing who is coming, and whether they understand what I'm doing."

Lynette describes her restaurant as a kind of "party" — albeit one that comes with a bill — and many underground restaurateurs harbor similar visions. Most chefs, after all, cook because they want to feed people great meals, but in the end, the compliments of satisfied diners are not always compensation for the headaches of running a business.

Club Azteca, in a private home in San Pablo, Calif., is open only on Saturday mornings. Customers sometimes drive hours for its menudo and lamb birria. Azteca, which starts serving at 6 a.m., is about eight months old.

"My parents used to run a restaurant before, but it was never as much fun as this," said Erika Carravieri, 30, who helps her parents operate the place. "Everyone drinks and sings, and at 6 o'clock in the morning! When they were running a restaurant, my mom aged so much in a year."

Gray hair is exactly what Michael Hebbe and Naomi Pomeroy hoped to avoid when they started Ripe in Portland, Ore. The young couple had cooked at a number of the city's better-known restaurants and knew, they said, how deflating and impersonal the professional cooking experience could be.

"The kitchen is demeaning," Mr. Hebbe said. "You cook for people you don't see. All you hear from guests is, 'This is undercooked' or 'This needs to be redone.' That environment doesn't seem sustainable or healthy, which is why the staff turnover at restaurants is so incredible."

Ripe, in contrast, was conceived three years ago as a twice-a-month supper club for a select group of guests. Their first night, Mr. Hebbe and Ms. Pomeroy served 22 people in their living-room-turned-dining room. Within months they had an online mailing list in the thousands and a bustling catering business.

Ripe recently moved into a tiny licensed commercial kitchen in the back of a downtown office building and is now, Mr. Hebbe said, "fairly legal." Guests pay \$20 (not including wine and dessert) to eat cassoulet or risotto served out of communal bowls.

After only two years of business, Mr. Hebbe says that Ripe is also profitable, which is more than most new restaurants can say. Mr. Hebbe attributes this to Ripe's underground roots. After all, he did not have to make an initial investment in a building or lay out a bundle for licenses, or insurance, or marketing, or staff. Starting a restaurant from scratch, depending on ambition and location, can cost hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars.

"The startup cost of most operations is astronomical," Mr. Hebbe said. "It's impossible to do it by the book and make money in your first three to five years."

Working underground can also be a way for a would-be restaurateur to test the waters of professional cooking. Joseph DeSalazar, 27, an advertising executive, runs a sporadically open restaurant called Foodies, serving dinner in various rented lofts in New York City. He ventured into his floating concern after spending his weekends volunteering in the kitchens at Café Boulud and 11 Madison Park. "With Foodies, I didn't feel like I was making a lifelong commitment," he said. "It isn't a fixed location, I don't have any expectations to live up to, and it can change every time."

Many underground concerns are born of neighborhood necessity. According to Jim Leff, a food critic who founded the Web site Chowhound.com, apartment-based restaurants are common among Brazilian and African families who live in immigrant communities in Queens. One family, he said, might make it its business to prepare cheap takeout meals for an entire apartment building.

"They are filling a niche that isn't filled by restaurants," Mr. Leff said, "doing it in areas where there are no restaurants, doing it at lower price points, or serving traditional dishes that restaurants are afraid to serve because they are too unusual."

Most underground restaurants are a simple matter of economic necessity. Mr. Leff's favorite, he said, is the domain of a "genius" cook who once ran the "best Venezuelan restaurant in New York." After that restaurant closed in a dispute between business partners, the cook could not afford to open her own establishment, so she began cooking out of the basement of her house in Queens.

"I've eaten there on card tables," Mr. Leff said. "She is basically a homeless chef. Housing is not the only thing that's being priced out of the league of real people."

The downside of running an underground restaurant is, of course, the chance of getting caught by the licensing authorities. Laws vary from state to state; in California, a dining establishment must comply with local zoning restrictions and be inspected by the fire department, the liquor authority and the health department. In addition, a state-certified “food handler” must be on staff at all times. New York has comparable requirements.

“It’s all about how to avoid making people sick,” said Jack Breslin, director of the consumer protection program at the San Francisco health department. “If no one is looking over my shoulder to see how I’m storing, processing and serving my food, the greater the risk of something bad happening.”

And although the health department, at least in San Francisco, probably will not throw underground restaurateurs in jail, it will shut them down if it sniffs them out, which is one reason most advertise only by word of mouth. (Mr. Leff recommends asking taxi drivers.) On Internet sites like Chowhound.com, diners often lament the passing of beloved underground boîtes, like the Blue Tarp Thai restaurant in West Philadelphia, where until this summer, students and professors from the University of Pennsylvania ate green papaya salad at tables in the backyard of the Phanthavong family’s row house.

Sunny Phanthavong, 18, said the family knew their restaurant was illegal, “but thought we were doing something positive for the community.” After several years in business, they were discovered by an observant police officer. “He was writing a ticket for someone who was eating outside while parked illegally, and saw through the gate,” Ms. Phanthavong explained.

In November, after receiving a loan from a community-oriented university program, the family reopened legally as the Vientiane Cafe, but it is not the same, Ms. Phanthavong said. “I miss the old days of the backyard,” she said.

Another drawback to the business of running an underground restaurant is the simple wear and tear that occurs when strangers troop through your home. Over the years, Lynette of Mamasan’s Bistro has lost, she said, “pretty much every good CD” she has owned to light-fingered guests. And one reason Mr. Hebbe in Portland decided to move Ripe into a licensed kitchen was concern about his white carpets. “Every two weeks our living room got ripped out to make space for tables,” he said, “and then we had to tear it down and clean up, and then two weeks later do it again. And we had to wash every single dish by hand.”

He may someday look back on those days of constant furniture rearranging and dish-water hands with fondness. Veva Edelson began her career running an illegal cafe in her home in Arcata, Calif., cooking vegetarian cuisine at bargain-basement prices. Today, although a co-owner of Firefly, a well-reviewed, popular and quite legal restaurant in San Francisco, she is sometimes nostalgic for its predecessor. “I have dreams that I’m moving Firefly into my mother’s living room and that it’s now a one-night-a-week restaurant, off the books and cash only, where people just come and enjoy themselves,” she said. “There’s so much less expectation when something is amateur.”

Up in her crowded apartment, Lynette occasionally thinks about making Mamasan’s legitimate. Last year, she looked into a restaurant space, but became discouraged when she realized that it would cost \$250,000 to renovate it and bring it up to code. So Mamasan’s continues as a part-time restaurant that, while barely taking in enough money to cover the rent, has the virtue of retaining its personal touch.

“I do it for the love, mostly,” she said. “I don’t exactly want to boast that I have an illegal establishment in my house, but this is how artists survive.”