Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is

The ‘pay first, eat later’ reservation concept in the United States may change the way restaurateurs run their businesses. Geraldine Goh ponders if she will ever dine at an establishment that asks for a full pre-payment of her meal.

While still relatively unheard of here in Singapore, restaurants that ask for credit card details when you make a reservation are nothing new to me. I have encountered this practice at hole-in-the-wall sushi joints in Tokyo and revered institutions like Paul Bocuse’s L’Auberge du Pont de Collonges in Lyon. A fee will be incurred upon a cancellation or a no-show, and a business loss is slightly mitigated for the establishment.

Paying upfront for my entire meal at the time of reservation is something else, though, and thankfully, I have only been made to do it once—on Christmas Eve at Alain Ducasse at The Dorchester in London. It seems that this no-payment-no-table practice is gradually finding its way into top restaurants in the United States. Alinea, Thomas Keller’s Per Se and The French Laundry, and George Mendes’ Aldea are just some of the heavyweight names that have implemented or will be adopting this form of reservation, also known as Tock, by early this year.

It is easy to see why such a system will benefit restaurants. Set meals or prix fixe menus. It gets tricky for places serving only ala-carte dishes, though. The Aviary, a cocktail lounge owned by Grant Achatz, owner-chef at Alinea, and Nick Kokonas, the brain behind Tock, have found a way around this problem. “We offer tickets as a deposit [which will be deducted from the total amount of your check]. This allows customers to know they have a table at the desired time and also, ensures attendance so the restaurant can better manage service, seating arrangements and walk-in diners,” explains Kokonas.

Proponents of this ticketing system argue that airlines have been operating in this manner for the longest time, to the point where people have accepted it as the norm. On the other hand, critics dislike its rigidity. Michael Whiteman of Baum and Whiteman, a New York-based food and restaurant consultancy, is one of those in the latter camp, opining that “dining out should be kept discretionary”.

Like Whiteman, restaurateurs here don’t appreciate Tock’s rigidity for customers, and it looks unlikely that this ticketing practice will be adopted by any of them soon. Sarah Trabaldo Togna of Italian fine diner Alba 1836 shared that, aside from occasions when a customer books the entire space, having a pre-payment policy “works against the restaurant’s priority of extending hospitality to all its guests”. Chef Hal Yamashita of Syun thinks that non-refundable policies “could potentially upset customers and affect the good relationships that have been forged with them”. He recognises that the practice may reduce food wastage and last-minute cancellations, but “the potential apprehension suffered by diners far outweigh the benefits”.

I share the same sentiments. Tock’s plus points were not immediately apparent to me as a customer. If I were forced to forego my ticket due to an urgent matter I had not foreseen when making the reservation a month ago, my experience with the restaurant would be dampened—without me even laying a foot into the establishment.

That is not to say I will avoid any restaurant with Tock or a similar ticketing system like the plague. It all boils down to how badly I want to dine at the establishment, and how difficult it is to get a seat there. If Tokyo’s Sukiyabashi Jiro adopts Tock, they can take my money and booking three months in advance. Thus, Tock may think it has found an ingenious way to solve the dreaded no-show woes, but at the end of the day, it may only be the cult restaurants that have been playing hard to get that would encourage customers to swipe their cards upfront. WD