

An open letter about reservation sales

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Restaurant owner Ryan Cole is concerned about the growing number of reservation apps that charge customers and are circling the city's hottest restaurants such as his neighborhood restaurant on Russian Hill, [Stones Throw](#).

Photo: Brant Ward/The Chronicle

Ryan Cole is the general manager and a partner at [Stones Throw](#) in San Francisco's Russian Hill neighborhood. He has witnessed the rise of restaurant reservation sales, and would like to share some thoughts on the matter. [Read the associated news story here](#), and join the discussion below. Cole's words follow:

I recently helped a friend get a reservation at a restaurant many would consider to be one of the hottest tickets in town. Post-dining, my friends were raving to anyone and everyone who would listen to them about how amazing their experience was. The key word was “experience.” They mentioned the food, service, atmosphere, difficult reservation process, and as a whole, they had an unforgettable experience.

Restaurants nowadays are just that – an experience. Great food can be marred by horrific service. An uncomfortable atmosphere can detract from amazing cuisine. A difficult or uninviting host can overshadow a flawlessly executed menu. That is why restaurants are categorized as the hospitality business, and not just the business of serving food.

I take pride in that, as do many restaurateurs. We are in the business of creating a memory, an experience, a magical and unforgettable few hours that hopefully stick with a person, evoking a feeling of pleasure and happiness. It is the combination of making a reservation, arriving at the restaurant for the first time, taking in the sights and sounds, being greeted warmly, and then enjoying fantastic food.

Here in San Francisco, the tech culture has become an incubator for new and inventive ways to do business in the restaurant and hospitality world. At points, it seems overwhelming, but as with all evolution, not only is it worth listening to, but it is a privilege to be part of new ideas and platforms that will ultimately shape the future of this business. As many as four or five new companies may approach me in a single week wanting to discuss anything from new payment options and methods, inventory management, e-commerce and gifting, and now most recently, selling reservations for a premium.

First and foremost, for the record, let me state I am a huge proponent of utilizing new and creative technology—so long as the technology NEVER impedes the steps of hospitality. I have adapted multiple new wireless payment systems, worked with a company that has developed quality gifting/e-commerce solutions, and even found a way to work with transportation services such as Uber to enhance the guest experience. All of these relatively new solutions allow us to enhance the guests’ overall experience.

With the introduction of the most recent hot-topic item—selling prime-time reservations—I feel sick to my stomach to think that restaurants of such high pedigree and prestige would agree to participate in something so fundamentally against the principles of hospitality. Allowing a person to pay for a reservation not only changes the expectations of that guest, but also sends a message saying if you have more money or means, we would prefer you dine at our restaurant. It sucks the excitement and enjoyment of dining at these top-notch restaurants right out from underneath the guest.

Proponents of these types of systems may argue that it lessens the chance of a

no-show (the restaurant world's financial nemesis), but in all reality, prime-time reservation slots are most likely to show up. Furthermore, most of the restaurants that have the ability to participate in these programs can fill these slots very easily should a rare no-show occur.

Others compare selling reservations to holding back some reservations for VIPs, friends, repeat guests, etc. Yes, every restaurant holds back tables to accommodate the aforementioned, but do they charge their VIPs, friends and regular guests a premium? The ultimate result is the restaurants and reservation companies are padding their pockets at the expense of providing an egalitarian experience for anyone who chooses to come and dine at their restaurant.

One person tried to liken this new pay-for-reservation model to the restaurant business catching up with the hotel and airline industries, which charge more for higher-demand times. While I respect that approach, with hotels and airlines, your payment is upfront and for a specified service. You have a place to stay, or a ride from point A to B. If demand is higher, so might be the price.

Within the restaurant world, it is simply paying for access to spend your money. It is basically taking the old practice of slipping the doorman a \$100 bill and skipping the wait for your table, but blatantly publicizing to the world that you can pay upfront, and reservation guidelines no longer apply. Is \$25 or \$30 in the pocket of the restaurant worth satisfying one guest's needs to shun 50 others?

Some people have also begun mentioning ticketing systems in the same breath of this pay-for-play phenomenon. However, ticketing is straightforward and transparent. You are paying for a set meal or experience, the same as everyone else at any given time. It is the only way to get that experience. And tickets don't bypass an existing system. While ticketing may only work in a small number of establishments, at least it is a fair, hospitable system.

As a side note, I recently noticed that Coi **adopted** the now-famous ticketing system created by Nick Kokonas from the Alinea/Next group. I personally think this is a great solution to transparently show supply and demand for a restaurant of this nature, allowing guests to choose their reservation times either at what they would expect be an average price, discounted price for less desirable times, or a slight premium price for prime times. Many people will actually pay less than they previously were. And for those who insist on a 7:30 p.m. reservation, they will pay a premium as that table will most likely be theirs for the entire evening.

Although I am grateful to be doing business in a vibrant and technologically advanced city such as San Francisco, business models such as these pay-for-reservations sites make me sad to see how some people value the consumer. Just because you can charge the premium doesn't mean you should. Sometimes the value of providing an unforgettable experience for everyone interested in dining at your restaurant, not just those that can afford to pay a premium to get in, is much more rewarding both financially and morally.

Deep down, I also believe the restaurants and companies facilitating these types of systems understand how inhospitable this is, since every pitch I have gotten either claims that a portion of the reservation fee is donated to charity or the restaurant has the option to donate their portion of the fee to charity. Please don't use a charity as means to justify increasing your personal financial gain.

Someone whom I have the utmost respect for once told me about the first time someone was willing to wait in line at his restaurant. A woman arrived 45 minutes prior to opening time and was committed to only being the first in line but ensuring she would get to dine at the restaurant that evening. I asked my friend why he didn't just take her name and tell her she could come back when the restaurant opened?

He said, "It is part of the experience. We don't open early. We don't let people walk up ahead of time and put their names down. But she is more than willing to wait just like everyone else. Instead, I got her a chair so she could be comfortable, and took care of her when we opened."

That is hospitality from start to finish, and it didn't cost anyone a dime. I hope others in the industry embrace that trend, instead of putting a premium on reservations.

– *Ryan Cole, Stones Throw.*