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Tater Tots for Two: It's a Date!



Elizabeth Lippman for The New York Times

COUPLES CORNER Channing Kehoe, left, and Brian McAuley on a date at Caracas.

By MELENA RYZIK
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WHEN Jenny Kirsten, a producer for the Food Network, went on her first date with Jason Beberman, a chef at Dressler in Brooklyn, they didn't splurge on a multicourse dinner with wine pairings. Instead, they went to the Rusty Knot, a West Village bar that teeters between dive and chic, for picklebacks: a shot of whiskey with a pickle juice chaser. They split a gourmet chicken liver sandwich — with bacon and red onion marmalade — followed by a couple of Tecates with salt on the rim, and then played the free jukebox.

Whatever, it worked: a year later, they are still together. Now their idea of a romantic meal might be a burger at Back Forty, a neighborhood place in the East Village with epicurean credibility; the burger is made of grass-fed beef and comes with homemade ketchup. They prefer to sit at the bar.

"We can cut the burger and share the fries, and make a date-night toast," Ms. Kirsten said. She sighed contentedly. "I'm too in love for my own good."

And thus is born false hope. Because dating in New York, as countless sitcoms, magazine articles and resolutely plucky blogs can attest, is no picnic. But let's say that, through some quirk of dinner party seating or online profiling, you manage to meet someone. Where to take them?

Where once date restaurants hewed to a certain standard of quiet finesse — white tablecloths, graciously discreet service, food that was refined but not remarkably so — now there is a whole new class of mood-inducing dining. Refined burger joints, artisanal [pizza](#), Korean fried chicken, slurpy noodle bar, underground izakaya: all are desirable, even romantic, date spots, provided there is a sense of adventure or discovery (and dim lighting).

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Michael Falco for The New York Times

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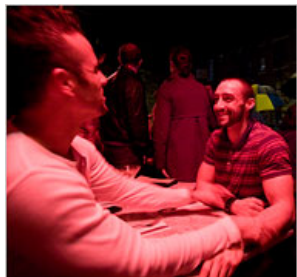
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Elizabeth Lippman for The New York Times

COUPLES CORNER Evrim Ozel and her fiancé, Attila Uysal, have dinner at Supper.

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Fernando Cruz, left, and Brandon Lappie are on a first date sitting outside at Supper.

“One of the things that we’re seeing happen is that a broader range of places are considered date places,” said Adam Rich, a founder of [Thrillist.com](#), the Daily Candy for dudes, which proffers advice on new restaurants and bars. “People fetishize food more than they did before. The pressure isn’t to find the most white tablecloth, white gloves kind of place, but you do need to find the best tapas, or they need to have the best Ibérico ham.”

After all, who ever goes home and gives a friend the post-mortem on the décor? “You gush about what happened — what did you say, what did he say — and then it’s like, what did you order?” Ms. Kirsten, 24, said.

Ambience, at least the kind that telegraphs rote romanticism and a flexible spending account, is less important than the thrill of the sought-out.

When he was single a decade ago, Michael Condran, 39, a director, frequented downtown bistros like Odeon, Balthazar and Provence. Now, he said, he would never go to something like that; no Pastis or Schiller’s — too obvious. Instead he and his wife, Sonja Johansson, a Feldenkrais practitioner, find romance in the fried chicken spots hidden on second floors in Koreatown.

“The really sexy part of it is the food, if you’re going somewhere and getting something that’s not available to everybody,” Mr. Condran

said.

Really good pork bun trumps corner banquette; comfort trumps stuffiness; and cheap is no longer an epithet.

“If you can spend under \$80 for a nice date meal, you’re definitely feeling good about it,” said Andrew Steinthal, a music executive. “Twenty dollars,” countered Rachel Wharton, a writer, whose ideal first date is hitting the taco trucks in Sunset Park, Brooklyn.

Consequently, casual is the new sophisticated; paper napkins and communal tables are the new standard.

“You don’t need to have candles on the table to impress someone who watches ‘Top Chef,’ because they maybe have a different understanding of what goes into food and restaurants,” said Chris Stang, 30, another music executive who, with Mr. Steinthal, 29, runs a new dining blog, [Immaculateinfatuation.com](#). It breaks restaurants into categories including “Date Night” and “First/Early in the Game Dates.”

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Frankie’s and Supper, where the lighting is low and the Caprese [salad](#) is made with fresh uncut Burrata mozzarella; Tía Pol, for tapas, often standing room only, in Chelsea; and Caracas, a bustling arepas joint with outposts in the East Village and Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

For dates later in the game, they like Ippudo, for house-made ramen. (Only long waits prevent it from being a first date spot; downtime is risky and should be avoided at all costs, they said.)

Ms. Wharton, 36, deputy editor of Edible Brooklyn and Edible Manhattan magazines, loves Lucali, a highly refined pizza place in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn. And then there’s the “eat-along date,” popular even with nonfoodies.

“You go to Sunset Park or Roosevelt Avenue or bounce around the East Village and have a bowl of ramen at Momofuku and then go around the corner to an izakaya on Astor Place,” she said. “I’m a big fan of dates like that, because you can see how people react to things they don’t know.”

New York’s larger hospitality trends are compatible with what people look for in a date restaurant: dressed-up comfort food, small plates and sharable dishes. “They promote a little more togetherness,” Mr. Rich, 29, said.

And it’s easier than ever to delay sit-down meals until several rendezvous in, because as date restaurants have become more informal, date bars have grown more polished.

“I think the double whammy of Crif Dogs and PDT is really cool,” Ms. Wharton said of the hot dog shop/mixology parlor in the East Village. “You enter through a phone booth and can order tater tots through the window.”

The Immaculate Infatuation boys favor Desnuda, a tiny cevicheria. “We avoid using the word sexy at all

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costs; this is the one exception,” Mr. Steintal said. And when you’re clocking in several Internet dates a week, a few potent conversation-starter cocktails and Mexican-spiced popcorn at Mayahuel, a tequila bar, is still manageable. (But apologies to online daters who think they’re anonymous: apparently every waiter in New York can tell an Internet date from a regular date. Spoilers later.)

“The cocktail bar/wine bar/small plate restaurant is a safe play early on — it’s much easier to hit the eject button if things get weird,” Mr. Stang said.

Whitney Hurst, 25, a news producer who lives in Brooklyn, agreed.

“There’s definitely been times when I’ve gone out with someone like three times and then I decided I couldn’t go to dinner because I’ve already exhausted all the things I could say to the person,” Ms. Hurst said. “I’ve used all my A material during the drinks. I’ve got nothing, they’ve got nothing, and that’s it.”

So much for at least getting a nice meal out of it.

Anyway, niceness is overrated. For a birthday dinner, Ms. Kirsten and Mr. Beberman went to Corton in TriBeCa, which earned three stars in *The New York Times*. “It was delicious,” she said. But, she added, “It was stiff. I have an obsession with taking pictures of the food, and I felt inappropriate doing that there.”

Money is also a consideration.

“It’s awkward to have somebody spend hundreds and hundreds of dollars on dinner before you really know that you like them,” Ms. Hurst said. She prefers izakayas like Ise or the pig-feet-centric Hakata Tonton, because they are cheap, casual and fun and because she likes to introduce people to Japanese food beyond sushi. “At least it gives you something to talk about,” she said.

Though formal service is too much, “there has to be some entertainment value, whether it’s the food or the uniqueness of the place,” said Gabriel, 29, a Manhattan lawyer. (He asked that his last name not be used because his employer, and his girlfriend, frown on interviews.) The communal table and the open kitchen, currently restaurant-design shorthand for comfort, can smooth over awkward silences. Both fall into the category of what Mr. Rich of *Thrillist* calls the “distraction date.”

“You pick a place that’s got some focal point that absolves you of keeping the conversation moving along,” he explained. “I think of a distraction date as the greatest date move there is.”

Communal tables have a bonus purpose: if your date’s boring, just turn and talk to someone else.

Kate McGuire, a hostess at *Supper*, which has many nu-romance hallmarks — the low lighting; communal tables; paper napkins; open kitchen; inexpensive, sharable dishes; secret entrance to the bar next door — has seen it happen. From her perch, she can quickly tell whether a couple’s having a good time.

“First they sit apart, then they have some wine and move closer,” she said.

Online daters are easy to spot: they’re physically awkward but conversationally intimate, because they’ve already dispensed with the basics, like favorite foods and hometowns. “Internet first dates, it seems like they move along faster because they have so much dirt on each other,” Ms. McGuire said.

Though rules about what constitutes an acceptable date are now fluid, the ripple effect still counts.

“If you pick a place that’s kind of out there and she’s never heard of it but her friend has, and her friend’s like, that place is supposed to be amazing, then your stock just went up,” Gabriel said. Winning over what he called “the board” — the sounding board friends — is key: “If you don’t make it past the board, you can still do it, it can be done, but it’s not the path of least resistance,” he said. “You’re definitely going to have work a lot harder or have a super connection with this person.”

And if you do, other singles said, you’re home free. On a first date with an eventual long-term boyfriend, Peter Friedman, 30, a lawyer, went to *MaryAnn’s*, a distinctly inauthentic Mexican restaurant. “The food wasn’t really great, but it didn’t matter,” he said. “I didn’t even notice what I was eating” because the spark was so strong.

He added: “It’s totally context. If somebody suggests, let’s meet at the bodega on the corner of 23rd and Lex, you’d be like, really? But I’d go, because it would be a damn good story the next day.”

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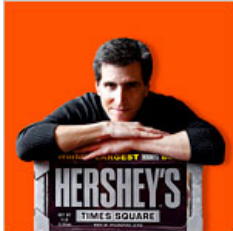
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