



Ssh! Secret suppers

Keep it under your hat (and under your belt) but a clandestine our waistlines – as amateur chefs with a flair for imaginative Magazine’s resident gourmand selflessly goes ‘underground’ to

gourmet movement is expanding our culinary horizons – and menus are playing host to donations-only dinner parties. Saga investigate the country’s fastest-growing foodie phenomenon

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It must have been a little like this in the French Resistance.

Key figures are identified only by *noms de guerre*; all contact is initially through intermediaries or via agreed communication drop-points (social networks on the internet are the norm these days); details of any proposed rendezvous are carefully withheld until principals are satisfied that newcomers are not informants – or worse, the enemy themselves. The latter come in various guises: tax inspectors, health and safety officials, local council bureaucrats, trading standards officers, interfering neighbours, jealous competitors...

...Welcome to the clandestine world of underground restaurants – the fastest-growing movement in the UK hospitality business (except that this isn't a business). Here you will be embarking on a gastronomic odyssey, unlikely to appeal to the unadventurous or bland-palated.

An underground restaurant, also known as a supper club, is an eating establishment operating covertly from private premises, usually bypassing local business use and health and safety regulations.

Effectively they are paid-for dinner parties, hosted by people who are generally gifted amateur cooks. Usually advertised by word of mouth or on Facebook and Twitter, they have proved so popular that providing references to make a reservation is not unknown.

They're not entirely illicit, but not entirely licit either. There are no bills or set prices. Usually guests will find an envelope in front of them into which they are asked to put a donation to cover costs (a suggested figure is mentioned when a reservation is confirmed), plus 10 to 20% to cover service. Wine isn't usually provided, unless it's integral to a dish, and guests are generally asked to provide their own.

How it all began...

Underground restaurants are thought to have begun in Latin America where they are known as *paladares* or *puertas cerradas* (closed doors) and often have higher standards and lower prices than in the licensed sector. Only in the past two years have they taken off in the UK – a development that can largely be credited to a London-based aficionado of the private family-restaurant *paladares* movement in Cuba, who styles herself Ms Marmite. Recently she has published *Supper Club* (Collins, £25) about the phenomenon under her real name of Kerstin Rodgers. On her website (see far right) there are more than 200 underground restaurants listed across the country. Addresses are, however, scrupulously withheld.

Following protracted correspondence by email and text, I finally made contact with the underground restaurant nearest to my home in Kent, operated by 'Hari Covert' (think about it). He and his excellent commis chef, called The Hands, run the operation from a private house in a village near Maidstone. Attendance at one of their secret suppers is by invitation only – which aren't easy to come by. He holds only two dinners per month and was booked up for the foreseeable future. The only hope was for a cancellation.

Then, five days before the next scheduled dinner, a message was left – untraceable, of course. We were asked to arrive at 7.30pm. The menu followed by email, and then finally the directions and address. The location was a three-storey terraced house in a cul-de-sac.

Hari, a reassuringly generously



girthed *bon vivant* in his early fifties, greeted us amiably in a large kitchen conservatory as The Hands passed among the nine guests with plates of nibbles. Slowly the noises of appreciation began, led by Thierry, a French jazz musician, and his English wife as we savoured mini-*croque monsieurs* and sipped a thimble-sized mint and pea *velouté*.

One of the guests observed that with couples regularly arriving, followed quickly by loud moans of pleasure, the neighbours could

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be forgiven for thinking a different kind of party might be in progress. 'No, that's only in Marden,' Hari remarked dryly. 'Foodies and swingers?' mused Thierry. 'That's a Frenchman's dream.' Later confiding that he is known to his British friends as the 'Gourmet Frog', he told me that he knew as soon as the *amuse-gueules* arrived that we were in the hands of an expert. He was right; Hari revealed that he used to be head chef at several leading restaurants before becoming a full-time restaurant-guide inspector. Now a self-employed businessman, he keeps his hand in by cooking for people who are passionate about food. 'It's about sociability,' he said. 'I had never met any of these people

Hari Covert's dinner menu

Welcome glass of fizz with assorted nibbles

Home-made terrine of pork and chorizo with beetroot and ginger chutney
Mixed salad leaves with a cranberry dressing

Roasted Scotch beef fillet with a wild mushroom fricassée and potato rösti
Pancetta-wrapped green beans

Winterdale Shaw & Stichelton cheeses
Porridge oat biscuits

Home-made lemon posset with fresh local raspberries
Home-made butter shortbread

Coffee with home-made chocolates



A guide to underground dining etiquette

- You're a guest in someone's home. Behave accordingly.
- Underground dining involves meeting new people and sharing tables with them. Sit where you're directed.
- Whoever serves your food and drink is not a paid employee. Don't expect them to hover attentively and fill your glass.
- Bring your own bottle(s) and offer to share with your fellow guests – and your host.
- If you're not prepared to try the sort of food you're not familiar with, underground dining is not for you. Be prepared to be surprised.
- Don't tell your host how you like your food cooked (viz, 'rare, but not too rare'). Take it as it comes.
- If you have specific dietary requirements, ensure that you give your host ample notice. Be flexible.
- Don't be late, and don't cancel at short notice unless you have a very good reason (like losing a limb).
- Never withhold your donation, even in the rare event that you are disappointed by the food. If your expectations are met or surpassed, add a gratuity of at least 10%.
- Be discreet. Never divulge your host's identity, address or personal contact details to anyone.

For more information, visit supperclubfangroup.ning.com or haricovert.com

before. None of them knew where they were coming. I love the mystery of it all.'

As we were devouring a melt-in-the-mouth Scotch beef fillet, accompanied by his signature bundle of haricots verts wrapped in pancetta, I asked if he ever worried about being 'busted' by the authorities? 'Why should I?' he replied. 'I cook good food, keep proper books and donate a lot of my proceeds to charity. What harm am I doing? That said, I don't want to attract undue attention.'

Other guests included a senior policeman (who didn't seem to be concerned by the legal

niceties of the operation) and the manager of a farmer's market near Canterbury. 'This,' she said, waving a home-made biscuit made with porridge oats, 'is the most delicious cheese biscuit I have ever eaten.'

Underground restaurants are not just about gourmet food. They're about the ambience, the wider guest experience and, not least, a sense of being part of a revolution in the British dining-out culture. Around 100 UK high-street restaurants close every month, yet more than 200 underground restaurants have opened in the past two years, with minimal attrition rate.

Something's cooking out there. ♦



