

Table manners

No-bookings policies inconvenience potential diners; no-shows annoy restaurateurs. Securing a dinner reservation can be a tricky business

A MAN walks into a Sydney restaurant. He has high hopes of dinner with two Italian guests who've heard great things about the place and put it on their must-do list. To be on the safe side, he's arrived early so he can put his name on a waiting list for a table – the restaurant doesn't take bookings – but is told he can't do so until all members of his party have arrived. There is already a 45-minute wait. Half an hour later, the tourists step through the door and the chap makes another approach to the maitre d'. Yes, he is told, he may put his name on the list now, but the 45-minute wait has stretched to three hours.

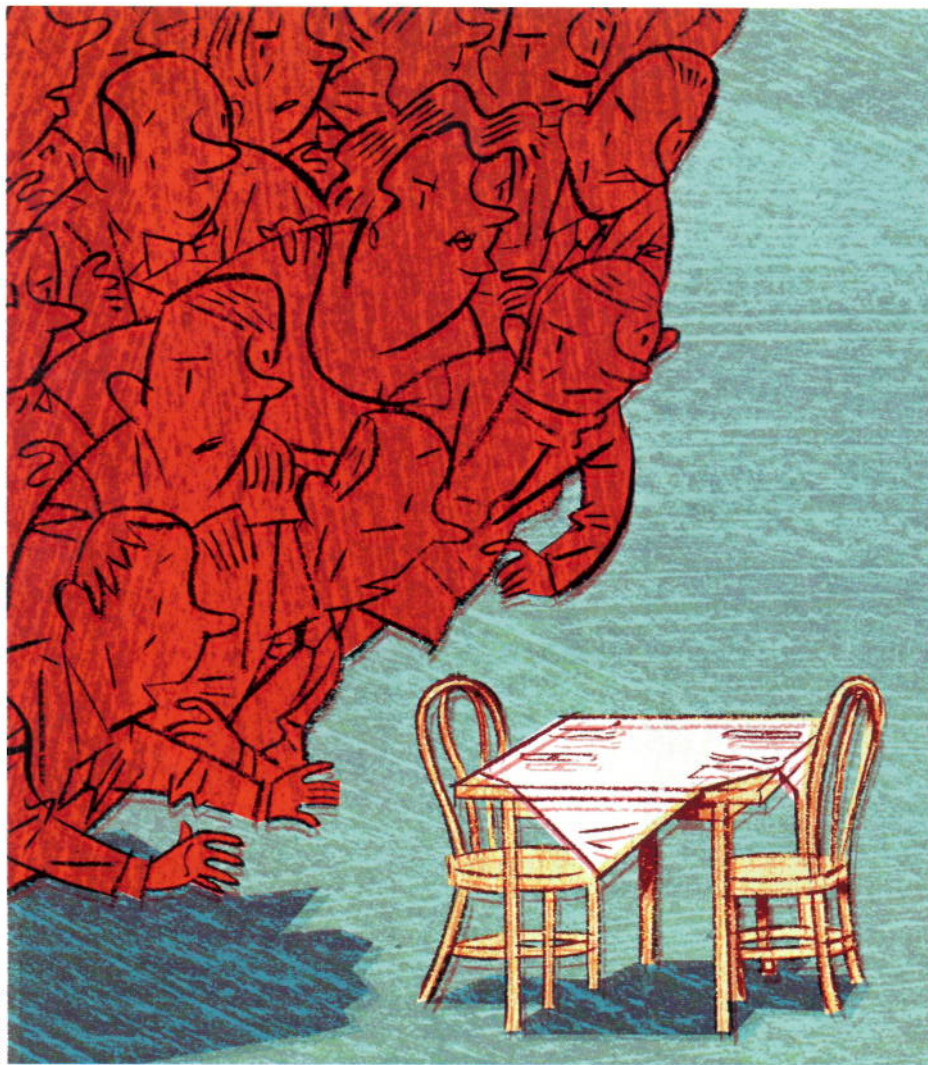
No-bookings policies have become more prevalent in Australia as businesses juggle turnover and overheads in tough economic times and, while reasonable diners would not begrudge a business the chance to thrive, management of such policies often leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Poorly monitored waiting lists; inadequate follow-up of customers waiting out of sight and failure to speed up diners lingering over their fourth coffee are among the complaints about this polarising policy. But is a capricious dining public to blame for the situation we find ourselves in? Some restaurateurs believe so.

"There would be at least 10 to 12 people who do no-shows even after confirming their booking that afternoon, especially on a Saturday night," says Christine Manfield of Sydney's Universal restaurant, which does take reservations. "It is incredibly rude, irresponsible and inconsiderate as it is too late for us to recover those numbers lost. It costs Universal about \$850 a week just to manage our bookings." Manfield "totally understands" why more restaurants, especially casual ones, are refusing to take bookings. "It takes at least one extra staff member just to manage the admin, plus the cost of phone calls to confirm or chase up," she says. "If you're a place that relies on turnover of customers to stay in business ... [it has to] be on a first-come, first-served basis. People have to accept this as a reality and not be so precious about reservations."

But what of those who prefer the certainty of a booking? After all, we're not all Gen-Ys hopping from bar to bar, happy to eat at whatever time we happen across a free table. In a time-poor era, secure reservations can be the difference between a good night out and an evening wasted.

Online reservation sites such as Dimmi and Bookarestaurant are stepping into the breach, offering customer and restaurateur peace of mind. "Increasingly, Dimmi is playing the role of online maitre d'," says its managing director Stevan Premutico. "We're providing restaurants with the tools to better manage their bookings, control their flow, maximise revenue, turn tables and reduce the cost of managing telephone bookings." Plus, he notes "50 per cent of bookings made through Dimmi are same day, indicating huge last-minute demand but also that people want certainty with their bookings".


Melbourne restaurants Flower Drum and Fenix have signed up to newly launched Yumtable, which offers last-minute restaurant deals and instant bookings via a new



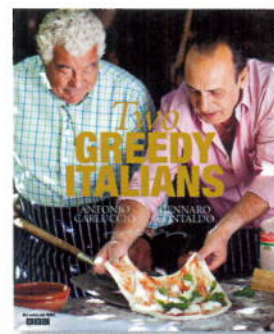
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website and iPhone app. Restaurants can list late-table availability and special deals and diners can search for and book available tables by time, cuisine and suburb. Yumtable will roll out the scheme nationally soon.

Longrain Sydney, which has had a no-bookings policy since it opened 11 years ago, has recently been refurbished and is also having a fresh look at the way it manages customer turnover. "We have taken over the previously occupied downstairs space and converted the basement into a separate bar," says Natasha Firman, spokesperson for the popular Surry Hills restaurant. "Inside the original Longrain we have added booths and individual tables of five to nine, which are available for bookings – a Longrain Sydney first."

This new Longrain policy, where some tables can be booked and others are left for walk-ins, is perhaps the perfect scenario. But until it becomes the norm, there needs to be give and take on the part of both consumer and restaurateur. Perhaps a policy of taking credit card details when bookings are made and debiting a fee in the event of a no-show is the answer. Those businesses that want the flexibility of a no-bookings system, meanwhile, would do well to ensure that potential customers spending their valuable time waiting for a table are kept informed, that waiting lists are properly monitored and that table turnover is efficient. Diners will vote with their feet if they feel their custom is not appreciated, bookings or no. 

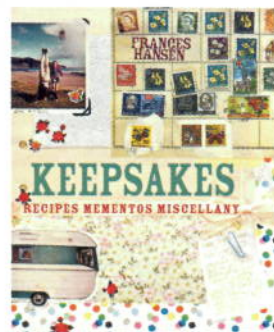
Michelle Rowe writes *Food Detective*, which appears in *The Weekend Australian's Travel & Indulgence* section.



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01 *Two Greedy Italians* by Antonio Carluccio and Gennaro Contaldo (Hardie Grant, \$39.95)

"Once and for all, spaghetti Bolognese doesn't exist. If someone serves you this they don't know anything about the cooking of Bologna," announces Carluccio in this compilation of traditional recipes from two of the godfathers of Italian cuisine in London. Some dishes seem alarming at first glance, but kid with egg and lemon sauce turns out to be a rather scrumptious-sounding goat concoction.

02 *My Grandmother's Kitchen* by Laura Clarke and Claire Wallace (Poynter & Wallace, \$49.95)

Short on frippery, long on flavour, this charming book goes to the heart of the matter by opening the recipe vaults of 19 grandmothers whose heritages stretch from India to Australia, and Chile to the Ukraine. Norwegian meatballs, toad in the hole with onion gravy, sticky rice dumplings with caramel and ginger sauce ... this is a chance to share in the mealtimes of families Australia-wide. I'll be including my grandmother's unbeatable bacon sandwich in the chapter left blank for the reader's own family recipes.

03 *Keepsakes* by Frances Hansen (Hardie Grant, \$49.95)

Hansen has found a home for her eclectic range of keepsakes – photos, sketches, old postcards and even a stamp collection – and sprinkled recipes collected from family and friends throughout this colourful, scrapbook-style compilation. It's a gorgeous effort but will surely take the most dedicated home cook to decipher and follow some of the less-legible handwritten recipes contained therein.