

TREND



A Mutual Feast

The sharing economy hits the dinner table.

BY AMY KLEIN

THE IDEA FIRST came to tech guru Guy Michlin three years ago. He traveled to Crete with his wife and daughter and “fell into every tourist trap” for the first several days. But everything changed when a Cretan friend sent him to eat with a local family. The authentic cultural immersion was “the best thing on our trip by far,” Michlin says. He resolved to build a business around that “magic,” and in 2012 EatWith was born. Just two years later the San Francisco-based company now operates in more than 150 cities in 32 countries around the world.

Michlin aims to create a third category of dining: Rather than eating at home or at a restaurant, EatWith creates a hybrid experience. Hosts offer a home-cooked tasting menu of a specific cuisine, set their prices, and welcome patrons into their homes. Customers sign up on EatWith.com, and the company profits by skimming 15 percent. U.S. cities currently include Chicago, San Francisco, Houston, L.A., and New York, with Austin and Portland, Oregon, soon to come. EatWith has shown no signs of slowing: The company just raised \$8 million in capital and is

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the pacesetter among similar companies like Feastly and Cookening.

The breakneck growth of this travel-inspired enterprise makes it the latest in a slew of thriving businesses that have successfully tapped into the sharing economy. It's now commonplace for people to rent out their apartments to travelers on Airbnb and employ their own

restaurant in dire need of anonymity?

More importantly, as our host, Ai, unveiled beautifully presented courses from the vegetarian Japanese menu—including home-made tofu with miso tamari, a fall vegetable salad, corn miso risotto, and kabocha squash custard—I questioned whether hosts could

I wondered if hosts could make enough money to ensure the company's sustainability.

cars to ferry customers with Uber. (CEOs Brian Chesky of Airbnb and Travis Kalanick of Uber recently tied for first place on *Forbes'* list of the most influential business leaders under age 40.) Now you can dine in a stranger's home thanks to EatWith.

A FOODIE HIDEAWAY

For my first EatWith experience, I shuffled into a factory turned apartment in Brooklyn, wedged myself onto a couch, and surveyed my bizarre surroundings: Vine-covered light fixtures hung from 30-foot ceilings, and custom-made, \$5,000 bicycles were propped nearby. Two long tables were set for 15 people, folks like me who paid \$53 for the seven-course dinner at the Ajito ("hideaway" in Japanese) dinner club. After moving to the dining room, we uncorked our BYOB wines, and I wondered if the "home restaurant" would be something I tried once for fun, or if it would become one of my go-to dining options. As in, "Honey, should we order in or go to a stranger's house for dinner?"

Or would sharing a meal with four Indonesians in town for a United Nations conference, two retired Swedes, a pair of New Yorkers, and a local Israeli couple and their visiting parents send me running back to a

make enough money to ensure the company's sustainability.

Ai's husband, Mathew, who builds the custom bikes, told me she does make a small profit, but only if you don't figure in her time—she spends three days prepping the meals. For now she doesn't mind because she aspires to be a professional chef and uses this as her test kitchen. But how many others are willing to do the same?

To solve this problem, some hosts have turned to simpler fare, such as \$28 brunches. Rebecca Williams from San Francisco tried hosting a \$55 sake supper with a sommelier to lecture on the wine pairings but found it more cost-effective to host a \$38 vegetarian Lebanese dinner, which was also less of a time investment (around seven hours). In the end, she makes a few hundred dollars, a nice side income for the ESL professor, who also used to work in the restaurant business and misses serving people.

"We're working with the hosts to improve their economics," says CEO and co-founder Michlin, who notes that a number of chefs in Barcelona, one of the company's first cities, have been able to make a living off hosting. And although

EatWith is often compared to Airbnb, he says they're different economic models. "If you're all about the money, we would screen you out."

This would seem to dampen interest in hosting, but there's no shortage of people waiting in line. EatWith has a strict vetting process for certifying hosts, including interviews and site visits to

inspect for quality and ensure it's a "trusted environment." This thoroughness may explain the 10,000 pending applications compared to the 500 verified hosts. The five-person vetting team hopes to approve thousands of hosts in the next two years. "It's important to us to find people who are passionate about cooking and hosting," Michlin says.

CURATING THE EXPERIENCE

Passion is what My Le Goel looks for when she embarks on her travels from Seattle. When visiting Barcelona she searched 100 different EatWith profiles to find something other than the usual *come to my home and make paella or tapas*. "I knew the rest of the trip I'd be eating Spanish cooking," she says. "I was looking for someone who would be great in terms of conversation and travel." She found an older couple who had traveled to 50 countries and had artifacts and tales to go with their Persian

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cuisine; since she's from Vietnam, they all had plenty to talk about.

Goel's intimate meal in Spain—just six people—sounded far different than mine in Brooklyn, which is one of the most popular offerings in New York City. I found it challenging to follow the multiple conversations among the 15 guests. The Swedes talked about their homeland, the Israeli parents discussed the holidays, and one New Yorker explained his Pebble, a smartwatch that displays his emails. ("Because sometimes I don't have time to pull my phone out of my pocket.")

Mostly, though, everyone discussed food, either the exquisite courses presented to us or the best local restaurants for tourists.

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Perhaps this was because the experience was curated so that the focus was on the meal itself, and the chef remained in the kitchen. (Hosts can indicate on their profiles if they will be joining the guests.)

For some the act of hosting—making guests feel welcome and cultivating camaraderie—is of utmost importance. “I love having strangers in my home,” says 29-year-old Sarit Wishnevski of Astoria, Queens. “It’s been really

DINNER WITH DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

This might be a refinement that EatWith needs in order to attract more customers and improve the experience: themes to make the dinner parties gel. In some ways, they’ve begun to do that, instituting the Chef Series in New York, where professional chefs cook in their homes. Williams, in San Francisco, is hosting a singles dinner with aphrodisiac foods. And what about an

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interesting learning how to balance serving and cooking—making sure everyone’s glasses are filled and their needs are being met—and how to facilitate conversation at the table all at the same time.” Given Wishnevski’s background in non-profit management and interest in food—in addition to volunteering at a soup kitchen, she works both as a personal chef and in a prep kitchen—hosting helps her focus on her long-term goals, which she hopes will involve a cross section of social services and food.

But the key to her successful meals might be their structure. She and her husband typically offer a Friday night dinner celebrating the Jewish Sabbath. Despite not being very observant themselves, they introduce traditional customs throughout the meal, such as lighting candles, making a blessing on wine, and serving challah bread. “We serve family style, so people have to pass the food around, which starts conversation, and they get to know each other,” she says. “If there’s a lull I might find a way to engage everyone at the table. With the structure of Shabbat, it makes my job a lot easier.”

EatWith book club? Or a meal for entrepreneurs? Perhaps a sports team watch party, or something for Dungeons & Dragons aficionados?

In some ways the guests are already a self-selected breed. “These are people who are well-traveled, sometimes foodies and sometimes not, but they’re open-minded and they want to try new things,” Michlin says. “If you’re new to the city or traveling a long way, you’re going to meet like-minded people.”

Yet for Williams the beauty of the meals is the eclectic mix of people—a recent dinner had a printmaker sitting next to a techie. “We’re so used to sticking to our very manicured social life through social media,” she says. “We’re told who to be friends with, and we only do things that have been cultivated for us. So I think this teaches people to go out of their comfort zone in personal relationships. I love connecting and seeing people who would not normally be in touch leave with an understanding of who the other person is.”

Amy Klein is based in New York City. She writes for Salon, The New York Times, and the Los Angeles Times.

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