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UNDERGROUND
SUPPERCLUBS. by Siobhan O'Connor



Flavor of the week

THERE ONCE was a time when Underground restaurants were actually underground. They were imbued with that word-of-mouth cachet that gets urban dwellers especially excited. Friends would tell friends, and a self-selecting group would file into strangers' apartments, garages, and basements for secret dinner parties prepared sometimes by professional chefs, but usually just by enthusiastic amateurs with excellent taste buds.

It naturally took off in New York, because New York loves its secrets: speakeasies tucked away in hotdog shops; licensed restaurants buried in basements of taco shops—all of which get polluted by the masses. Cool factor gone.

But being cool was never the point with supperclubs. And the affordable five-course meal was only a part of the appeal. "The best part is there's such a wide, wide range of people coming," says Mike, who has been running Studiofeast dinners for the past two years in New York. "If you go to a restaurant on a busy night it's like that anyway—bankers, artists, lawyers, day traders, all sitting side by side, but you don't talk to each other." At supper clubs, though, socializing is center stage.

On a recent Friday night, the duo behind Whisk & Ladle, a better-known dinner party hosted in a Williamsburg loft, are busy searing espresso-rubbed skirt steak I arrive. It's not a traditional supper club tonight; the crowd made up of the young couple and their parents, bandmates and roommates, models and media

types. With all the mingling and gulping wine, it's quite clear that as good as the food is, this is really a people thing, not a food thing.

Of course, there's a range. Perhaps the best known of this ilk is the Ghetto Gourmet, which unwittingly launched the trend in an Oakland, California, basement in 2004 by Jeremy Townsend and his line-prep brother. Since then, similar suppers have sprouted up in cities all over the world.

And they're still hard as hell to get into. They have mailing lists 7,000-people long. Since they can only seat 10-40 people at a time, depending on the host, that can make for wait lists longer than Babbo's on a Saturday night. Recently, I was lucky enough to make the cut.

I joined ten strangers in a Manhattan studio apartment. We were greeted by two Mikes, one meticulously seeding Roman tomatoes, the other deftly crafting a cocktail made of muddled pineapple, vanilla liqueur and rum. Instructed to come up with a name for the drink and make ourselves at home, we did just that as our hosts chatted about the first course.

By the time we finish our first *amuse bouche*, there is a casual familiarity in the air. Soon, Chef Mike presents a platter of high-end Cheeto-looking things: tapioca flour and Parmesan chips, deep-fried and sprinkled with those tomato seeds and some aged balsamic. He explains that the theme of the night would be something called *umami*. Discovered about a hundred years ago, *umami* is quite liter-

ally the fifth taste, he explains. It's not sour, or sweet, salty or bitter. It's savory and it's in most of the things we find delicious.

Then we're treated to our first course, cured fluke drizzled with brown butter and seaweed. Next are giant clams perched in a bacon-dashi broth that is smoky, salty, *umami* perfection. As the night progresses, the courses (pork belly, steak with ramps) are each a fresh take on familiar flavors, done in a deeply inspired and original way.

Supper clubs are not snotty, foodie hangouts. No one sits around debating whether white or black truffle oil is better, and you will rarely find unpalatables like offal on the menu. There's a playfulness that you can't find in a restaurant.

As the night wears on, strangers are swapping phone numbers, sharing cigarettes, and chatting up a storm. Mike seems delighted. This is in a way an extension of his upbringing, making massive meals with his massive family. Although his father runs a Chinese-food restaurant in Michigan, Mike never worked a day of his life in a restaurant.

"I had no intention of doing it," says Mike. "I'd heard of Ghetto Gourmet and I realized I was sort of doing this anyway—having huge meals with my friends where we would cook elaborate meals. What they were doing looked a lot like the same thing. So I decided to give it a name. I want to cook good food and meet cool people," he says.

Indeed, his dinners, provide both. •