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CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

This article about underground restaurants in Washington said that the Jain religion, practiced by the host of a supper club called Hush, prohibits the consumption of meat, root vegetables and dairy products. In fact, dairy is allowed. In addition, the article described a meal at Hush that included a carrot dish; it should have made clear that Hush's dinners do not always follow the dietary tenets of Jainism.

Dinner is served, but we can't tell you where

By Jane Black
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, March 10, 2010

On Feb. 23, a select group of Washingtonians received an intriguing e-mail: "The orange arrow is pointing at you," the subject line read.

It was an exclusive invitation to "an exclusive underground anti-restaurant," the e-mail explained. "Because the DNA of the magical dinner is unmapped, these events will evolve, month to month, season to season, place to place & plate to plate."

The invitation alone wasn't enough for diners to make the cut, however. For the privilege of attending [Orange Arrow's](#) inaugural, \$125-a-head dinner, guests had to agree to abide by certain rules.

"If you can't/won't eat certain things, this is not for you."

"No crybabies, whiners or buzz kills can come to our party. This isn't reality television."

"Don't try to sell your ticket on Craigslist. Failure to show basic decency gets you on the blacklist."

Reached by phone, Orange Arrow's co-founder, a James Beard award-nominated chef, made no apologies for the invitation's tone or defiant exclusivity. "We don't want them in if they're not fun or interesting," said the chef, who requested anonymity. "This is a private club. In a restaurant, you're a whipping post. This is a completely different thing."

In a city best known for its see-and-be-seen culinary destinations, a new breed of underground restaurants is emerging. These supper clubs shun pomp, circumstance and plebian steak dinners in favor of more-offbeat dining experiences. Some operate as for-profit businesses. Orange Arrow plans to obtain location and liquor permits for its ambitious suppers, which will host as many as 150 select "hungry, hedonistic gypsies" at venues that range from a museum to an alleyway. Others lurk in a legal gray area, accepting "suggested donations" for the food and wine to get around requirements for business and liquor licenses. [Hush](#), the brainchild of a former World Bank staffer, invites no more than 16 for an intimate evening of home-style Indian food and culinary storytelling. There are even traveling underground restaurants. On Feb. 20, 40 in-the-know hipsters surrounded a long table to eat garlicky shrimp (and learn to suck out the heads) at the area's first [Wok + Wine](#) event.

Already, demand is strong. Orange Arrow sold 30 percent of its tickets within 24 hours; it

GALLERY

A peek inside an underground restaurant

Unlicensed and under-the-radar restaurants have long prospered overseas, but the trend is now gaining steam in Washington. A hostess who goes by the name of Geeta runs one such establishment, Hush Supper Club, out of her home in Northwest Washington.

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requires visitors to visit <http://orangearrowdc.com> to list a reference in order to get past the virtual velvet rope. After just one month of taking reservations at <http://hushsupperclub.wordpress.com>, Hush has an e-mail list of 300 interested diners, and every meal has had a waiting list. "The demand is unbelievable," said the host, who goes by the name Geeta and runs Hush out of her home in Northwest Washington. "I thought, you know, I'd join Twitter and send out some e-mails and maybe some people would check it out. I thought it would take six months to build interest, not 10 days."

Unlicensed restaurants have long prospered overseas. In Hong Kong, si fang cai, or speak-easies, in private homes are considered by many to have the best food in the city. But clandestine kitchens are a more recent phenomenon in the United States. The Ghetto Gourmet, which began serving meals in the basement of an Oakland, Calif., apartment in 2004, was one of the earliest. Soon, the concept spread to big cities everywhere. In Atlanta, RogueApron threw an event in an alley between boarded-up houses. In New York, patrons of A Razor, A Shiny Knife have together learned to carve a 150-pound boar. In Washington, two professional chefs launched a short-lived underground experiment, also called Hush, in Eastern Market in 2007. But it wasn't until this year that the trend took off in earnest.

Washington's new underground restaurants generally divide into two categories: amateur cooks who want to offer a new kind of experience and recovering restaurateurs who want to set their own rules.

Hush falls into the first group. For between \$50 and \$75 per person, Geeta serves the dishes she grew up eating in her mother's kitchen, including dhokla, steamed lentil-and-rice flour cakes, chana masala (chickpea curry) and sweet carrot halwa. It's a way of sharing her Gujarati culture and her religion, Jainism, which prescribes a diet that bans root vegetables as well as meat and dairy products. "If you want fine dining, go to [Rasika](#)," Geeta said, referring to the popular restaurant in Penn Quarter. "This is the comfort food I've been served since I was in the womb."

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