

Inside a Secret Restaurant

By Baylen Linnekin | 06/08/2011 | Food & Drink | Dining | Restaurants | 1 Comments

WASHINGTON _ Most restaurateurs spend their long, waking hours trying to figure out new ways to make potential customers aware of who they are and where they're located. They spend their few sleeping hours beguiled by nightmarish fits that they haven't done enough.

Hush Supper Club, which launched in February 2010, is unlike most restaurants.

Hush serves tasty Indian vegetarian fare. It has no sign above its doors. A Twitter profile describes the restaurant as located somewhere in Washington's sprawling "U Street corridor." In other words, Hush doesn't even share its address. The restaurant's proprietor, Geeta, has no last name to speak of, may or may not use a pseudonym and doesn't permit patrons to photograph her face unless she's wearing her trademark mask.

If all that's not enough, Geeta also requires potential diners to submit a facial photograph and to complete a detailed survey on a variety of matters, including questions about cooking habits and hobbies, before she'll even think about accepting their reservation.

The suggested \$75 fee doesn't include drinks, save for water and a welcome spritzer. Guests bring their own. Oh, and did I mention that the centerpiece of the evening is a talk — based on the hostess's thesis that "India's on the move, and I want to get the West to know India" — that includes a rather lengthy lecture on religion?

Does all this sound like a recipe for failure? Maybe so. But Hush works.

Really.

Why? How? Hush succeeds in large part because of its untraditional approach; it's an underground restaurant. Hush — along with similar ventures — isn't *underground* in the subterranean sense. Rather, the word *underground* serves here as a euphemism for a loaded but more accurate term: *illegal*.

Like underground restaurants operated in private homes in cities as far-flung as San Francisco, New York and Miami, Hush hasn't exactly acquired any of the costly city-mandated licenses or permits. No health inspector has ever gone over the Hush kitchen with a checklist. Instead, Geeta, with a little help from her friends, operates a restaurant in her home for up to 20 guests at a time on a couple dates each month.



In the taxonomy of illicit food, underground restaurants like Hush should not be confused with another phenomenon you've probably heard of by now, the pop-up restaurant. In the case of a pop-up restaurant, a young or aspiring chef might rent out an existing restaurant space on the restaurant's off evening.

So if you're eating in a restaurant with a sign out front and a cash register inside, chances are you're doing something fun and legal. You can tell everyone. In a private home? No sign? Cash only? Probably more fun, and probably less legal. Shhhh.

An historic appetizer

Underground restaurants are not new and are by no means an American phenomenon. They have long existed around the world, in places where regulations range from slack to strict. One of the best-known examples of a genus of underground restaurant is the Cuban *paladar*.

Though now legal, these restaurants operating out of private homes became popular after Cuba's sugar daddy, the U.S.S.R., dissolved and turned off the aid spigot in the early 1990s. To make ends meet, Cuban entrepreneurs took to serving food to wealthy tourists illegally out of their homes. They were so successful that the communist government decided to legalize and tax the hell out of the *paladares*.

While Cuba's otherwise detestable communist government has embraced capitalist cooking, America's local and state governments continue to lag well behind Cuba in this respect, forcing American home restaurateurs underground.

Why this underground craze? As in the Cuban example — or in the case of America’s exploding food truck scene, its pop-up restaurants and the growing lines outside soup kitchens — America’s underground restaurants are in large part a function of the recent economic downturn. Often, underground restaurants might be run by an out-of-work chef or by a homeowner who knows her way around the kitchen and who might have realized that hosting a couple of tasty dinners each month can help stave off the circling foreclosure buzzards.

How to find underground restaurants

The furtive nature of underground restaurants like Hush means those serving the meals risk costly fines and even closure—a fate that befell Brooklyn’s Taste of Hawthorne last year, and Seattle’s Gypsy before that. To minimize risk, underground restaurateurs have devised a variety of ways to weed out potential food narcs.

“We post announcements about dates of our underground restaurant dinners on Twitter and occasionally (and begrudgingly) on Facebook,” says proprietor David of Lazy Bear, a San Francisco underground restaurant. (David’s use of the word “begrudgingly” to describe his use of Facebook only hints at just how much he dislikes the social network. “I detest Facebook and loathe any second I have to spend on that horrible and ever-changing site,” he says.) Similarly, Geeta tweets regularly on behalf of Hush.

But social media is just the first layer. To score a seat at Hush, potential diners must first complete the aforementioned survey, and provide a photo “for Geeta’s safety and Mama Geeta’s peace of mind,” she explains online. Once she’s accepted a reservation, Geeta emails the diner on the day of the meal with instructions, ground rules and the evening’s menu.

Looking for an underground restaurant in your neck of the woods? The best place to find one is by scrolling through this exhaustive website run by Kerstin Rogers, a.k.a. msmarmitelover, who is author of the new book Supper Club: Recipes and Notes from the Underground Restaurant.

Back underground

For my recent trip to Hush, a \$75 cash-only “donation” secured for me a meandering *seven* hours of good food and fun conversation with the hostess and other guests. Some of my dozen fellow table-mates on this night included my girlfriend, Geeta, Geeta’s friend Wes, a slightly-zany, foreign-born NASA meteorologist who opposes space exploration and a well-traveled and slightly crazy-eyed State Department lawyer.

I found those seated with me to be dressed more casually than what one might find at a comparably-priced restaurant on a weekend evening in the nation’s capital. Perhaps this was because many came to dinner from work on Friday, the only day when casual dress is permissible. Or maybe not.

Hush has no dress code beyond Geeta’s request that diners not wear stilettos. They could ruin her wood floors. Notably, even the lawyer wore no tie. (Though I’m also a lawyer, I generally prefer a tie only to a noose.) Lazy Bear similarly posts no dress code, though for al fresco events David may advise his San Francisco diners to dress in layers so as to combat the city’s notoriously dodgy weather.

If my fellow Hush diners were fun and interesting and casual, then so was the food. The family-style meal included several appetizers, entrees and a dessert. Fresh fruits and herbs highlighted the menu, which included appetizers like mango-mint lassi — one of the night’s highlights — and cilantro-mint chutney. Entrees included sautéed bell peppers with besan. The dessert course consisted of ghari, a sweet, bite-sized, cookie-like creation and chai.



While Geeta may not share the stresses of a traditional restaurateur looking to expand her realm, she’s already opened up a branch of Hush in her native Chicago and is looking to take Hush on the road to San Francisco this summer. For those looking to take part in the Hush experience, check out the Hush Supper Club [website](#) for more details.

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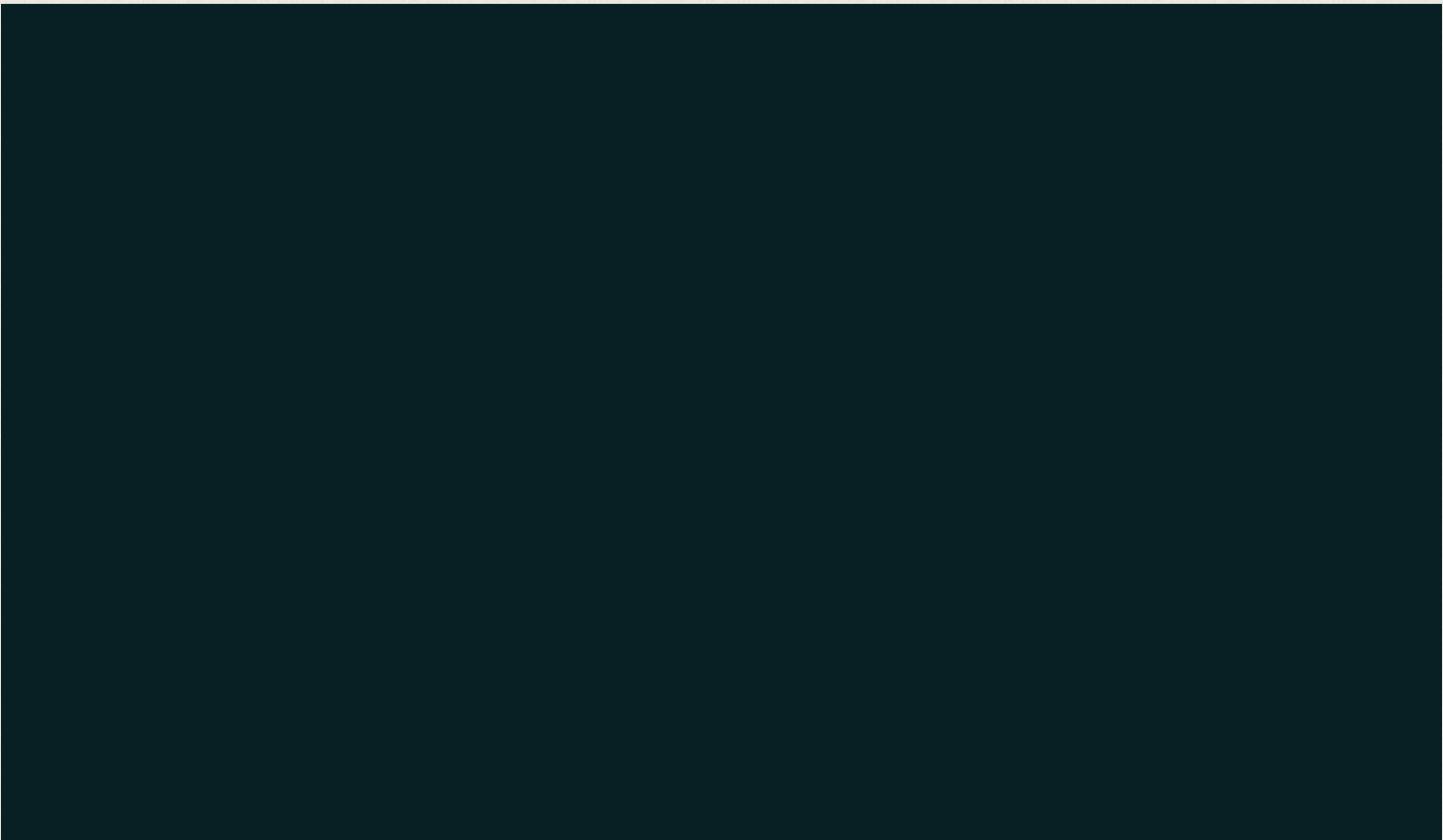
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