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London restaurants refuse to take bookings as diners are forced to wait two hours in queues

Restaurants are making more money by not holding tables – but diners pay the price

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The queue outside Burger & Lobster, Soho, on a Friday night. There is a second queue inside. Photograph: Andy Hall for the Observer

A line of people wait patiently on the pavement of a Soho street in London on a midweek evening. They shuffle slowly forward towards the commanding figure of the doorman, who warns them they will have to wait longer.

The queue is not for a modish nightclub but for a restaurant. It has become a common scene in central London and is spreading to other parts of the UK. Many restaurants now refuse to take reservations and tell customers they could wait up to two hours to eat.

Joyce Wang, a restaurant blogger, said she hated the new trend of queueing. "Now I try to get there early or wait a maximum of 15 minutes. If you are savvy, you don't go at

peak times," she said.

Before 7pm on Thursday, the queues are already forming in Soho. Outside Honest Burgers, 10 people are waiting to give their names to a waiter who then tells them how long they will have to wait. Another group arrives, summoned by text message. "We waited 40 minutes, when they said it would be 90. We promise we'll eat quickly," said one.

On nearby Dean Street, the much larger Burger and Lobster has one queue to get to the door, which is monitored by a doorman. Inside, there is another queue to a hostess, who then tells customers how long they have to wait and ushers them to the packed bar.

Around the corner, the restaurant 10 Greek Street offers a two-hour wait. But at the long established L'Escargot which is now owned by Marco Pierre White, the restaurant is quiet at 7pm and tables are immediately available.

Wilkes McDermid, another blogger, said that he first noticed the trend a few years ago. "I think the main reason is that restaurants don't have to worry about no shows, although I'm sure there is a marketing benefit when it is very obvious a place is popular and people are willing to wait," he said.

The queues suggest a booming economy in London, but could also reflect a change in culture. Michael Gottlieb, chairman of the Restaurant Association, said that more and more people regard eating out as common practice as entertaining at home becomes rarer.

He said: "London is booming in a way that I have not seen since I started in the business in 1980, and the range of diners is growing. London remains a bubble, but there is definitely a general improvement elsewhere in places like Sheffield, Birmingham and Liverpool."

The practice of not taking reservations is driven by mercenary and fashion reasons, says Gottlieb. "The reason people do not take reservations is because they make more money not holding tables for reservations and they think they can get away with it. When they don't have the queues, they will take reservations. Though when that is the case, you won't need a reservation," he said.

Gottlieb, the American founder of the Smolensky restaurants, said he did not think the practice had been imported from the US. "These days it's more likely that trends in restaurants will go from London to the United States," he said.

Diners in Belfast queue for Villa Italia and the practice is common in Manchester. The city's Almost Famous seemed to pride itself on maintaining queues and an indifferent attitude to customers until it burned down earlier this year.

Its sister restaurant, Luck, Lust, Liquor and Burn, has carried on the trend and it is common to wait for an hour to eat midweek.

The trend has not yet become common in Scotland where popular restaurants insist on reservations, sometimes weeks in advance.

Queuing for restaurants is not new. Chartier opened in Paris in 1896 and hundreds continue to pass through the Rue du Faubourg-Montmartre restaurant every hour. Service is fast but there are invariably queues.

The practice is also common in the United States in areas such as the 14th Street corridor in Washington DC.

Queuing makes more sense for restaurants with a quick turnover and low prices. John Devitt, the owner of a Japanese restaurant, Koya, said that queuing made more sense for certain types of cuisine. "In Japan you would not make reservations to go to a noodle bar. People don't eat dessert, so they don't linger. It's more authentic and more democratic," he said. "At Koya, people spend around £25 and about 45 minutes. If you are spending £50, you might feel entitled to a guaranteed place for 90 minutes or so. Some people are surprised that we don't take reservations, but they don't understand the style of restaurant."

There is no shortage of new restaurants in London. Scores open every month. But it seems unlikely that will lead to shorter waiting times.

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