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Restaurants Offer Discounts, Special Menus to Attract 5:30 Dinner Reservations

BlackSalt, Recette, Marea court early diners with red carpet, while Alinea and Next sell tickets, vary prices

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By ALINA DIZIK

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Dinner at 5:30 at Marea in New York, can feature octopus. *Noah Fecks*

Danielle Guzman has a strategy for scoring reservations at New York's best restaurants: She forgoes the cool factor and dines at 5:30.

WSJ Radio

Alina Dizik tells WSJ's Mathew Passy why more restaurants are offering specials to attract diners at earlier times.

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Eating a few hours ahead of the city's standard 8 p.m. dinner rush means Ms. Guzman got into Babbo, the Manhattan hot spot co-owned by celebrity chef [Mario Batali](#), last month with her husband and daughter on less than a week's notice. The restaurant usually refuses substitution requests, Ms. Guzman says,

but when she ordered beef cheek ravioli with black truffles for her 2-year-old, Cora, she was allowed to swap the buttery mushroom sauce for a simple tomato-based one.

Restaurateurs are trying to fill the pesky 5:30 dinner hour with a combination of sophisticated early menus and online booking specials. And fine restaurants are fine-tuning their service approach to make early diners feel they are getting more than the "early bird special."

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Ms. Guzman says she finds restaurants are more accommodating at 5:30. "We get the same quality and the same experience," says the 43-year-old product manager for a financial firm. "The rest is all in your head."

Many restaurants say they see demand for early reservations moving upward, as more young couples and groups of colleagues look to dine after work, not stand at a bar. Peter Kend, a 50-year-old private-equity investor, says about three years ago, late-afternoon meetings set him off in search of an early dinner before heading home. Now, with many of the city's trendiest restaurants perpetually booked solid from 6:30 to 9 p.m., even many of his business associates don't balk at the idea. "It doesn't matter if you call a month in advance, Mr. Kend says. "They say, 'Do you want the 5:30 or the 10?'"



View Graphics
 © The Wall Street Journal (Recette); Scott Suchman (Black Salt); Evan Sung (Le Cirque); Noah Fecks (Marea); Christian Seel (2)

At Recette, a popular Greenwich Village restaurant, Mr. Kend says he goes for the "summer supper" menu from 5:30 to 7 p.m. and appreciates that he doesn't feel as if he is "with my grandparents back in Miami Beach." The \$40 prix fixe meal features some of the same dishes found on the \$78, \$105 and \$155 tasting menus. Yet Mr. Kend says he and his wife, Katherine, get more attention at the earlier hour.

Jesse Schenker, Recette's chef-owner, says he created the summer supper menu last year after realizing many regular patrons had left town. "I was

looking at an empty restaurant until 7," he says. Diners select four dishes from the regular menu, served in smaller "supper portions."

"Nobody loves to have a full dinner in the daylight," Mr. Schenker says.

Since starting it up again in late May, Mr. Schenker estimates the supper special has drawn about 20 to 30 patrons who wouldn't normally have splurged on the regular-priced tasting menus.

Reservation websites steer diners to 5 or 5:30 p.m. bookings. Groupon's Reserve website, launched last year, lets users book off-peak reservations at high-end restaurants, including at the 5:30 slot, for discounts of as much as 30% off the total bill.

Members of Opentable's 1,000 Points rewards program earn additional points for booking early time slots. The Leloca app offers last-minute discounts at participating restaurants to users, who have 45 minutes to redeem the deal code they get on their phone. Most offers are for early weekday time slots, says founder Douglas Krone.

Starting this summer, Le Cirque, the fancy 40-year-old New York restaurant, is offering patrons who eat before 6 p.m. a \$55 "early dinner" menu, featuring "heritage dishes" like Dover sole and wild Burgundy escargots. More restaurants see 5:30 as an opportunity, says Marco Maccioni, director of Le Cirque in midtown and part-owner of parent company LC International.

"Anyone that fills your early hours feels like a second-class citizen, but actually they are probably your best friend," he says.

Participation in Groupon's Reserve website has helped Le Cirque fill tables at 5:30, Mr. Maccioni says, but there are drawbacks to discounting. Regular patrons don't like to



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find out that early diners get a discount on the same meal, he says, and in the long run discounts can dilute the brand. "You have to balance your exposure [because] we're being criticized for participating in these discount websites," Mr. Maccioni says.

At Alinea and Next, in Chicago, partner Nick Kokonas sells seats outside prime-time hours at a discount through a reservation system that he created and is now selling to other restaurants. Rather than pay at the end of the meal, diners purchase advance tickets which cover the cost of a tasting menu. Price varies depending on reservation time. At Next, a Wednesday dinner at 5:30 recently cost \$130, while a Friday dinner at 7:30 was \$195. "It's no different than going to a matinee," Mr. Kokonas says.

Black Market Bistro, a no-reservations fine-dining spot in Garrett Park, Md., started taking reservations only in the 5:30 to 6:30 hour to fill up early, says Jeff Black, executive chef of Black Restaurant Group, based in Bethesda. The offer attracts people who are unwilling to wait for a table during peak hours, he says.



BlackSalt, in Washington, D.C., takes reservations from 5:30 to 6:30 only, to promote early dining. *Scott Suchman*

Demands are different at 5:30. "Early diners don't drink as much and don't stay as long," Mr. Black says, meaning they are usually done before the 7:30 rush. At BlackSalt, in Washington, D.C., Mr. Black says he instructs the staff not to blast the air-conditioning, because with more empty seats people get chilly. Music levels are lower to create a less-buzzy atmosphere. When training servers, he tells them that any setting of tables is strictly forbidden once 5:30 rolls around. Early guests "have the full red carpet," he says.

At New York's popular Marea restaurant, 5:30 dinner usually lasts less than two hours. "It's a quicker affair," says Rocky Cirino, managing director at Altamarea Group, compared with peak hours when diners may linger for 2½ hours. One catch is that early diners tend to arrive late—and risk eating into their time

before the 7:30 changeover. To counter the time crunch, Mr. Cirino says he has servers bringing the wine and food menus at the same time.

Restaurateurs say they depend on 5:30 seatings not just for revenue but also for smooth operations. Early dinners help the wait staff and kitchen ease into the rhythm of the evening service. Otherwise, a quiet kitchen can get slammed with a mob of 7 p.m. reservations. "You always have that vulnerability of getting caught with your pants down," Mr. Cirino says.

Jeff Cutler, a 49-year-old social media writer who lives Hingham, Mass., says his preference for early dining elicited a few laughs from associates earlier this year, while they were attending the South by Southwest tech and music conference in Austin, Texas. Some call it the "blue hair time period."

He says he isn't concerned with his image—unlike late diners, "who consider themselves really hip," Mr. Cutler says. "If you go out to eat at 8 at night, everyone is trying to rush you," he adds. "It's like you're on an assembly line."

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