

The new kitchen confidential

You think Primehouse NY is hard to get into? Try scoring a reservation at one of the city's super secret, illegal but trendy dinner party spots that are hosted by foodies in their own homes. By Annemarie Conte

It's a bitterly chilly Sunday night on the West Side of Manhattan, and as 24-year-old Justin steps out of an elevator and into the dingy hallway of a strange apartment building he's never been to before, he nervously wonders what he got himself and his girlfriend, Rebecca, into. The lengths he went to just to get here were extreme and unusual, to say the least. Filling out the entrance application a few weeks before, he'd surmised that "law student" wasn't going to cut it, so he typed in "U.N. diplomat," which technically isn't a lie, Justin says, "because I do some diplomatic work for a small country in Asia."

After passing a background check, Justin was given directions to seal half of the \$125-per-person fee in an envelope and bring it to a drop location in Midtown. There, the elevator doors opened onto a lobby, where

a receptionist silently accepted his parcel. Minutes later, Justin received an e-mail with these instructions: "IT IS VERY IMPORTANT that silence is maintained while walking through this hallway. All noise can be heard by neighbors and that can bring attention to our operations, which isn't acceptable."

And now, slightly anxious that his money has been pilfered, Justin and his girlfriend knock on the door of the

apartment they've been directed to via the mysterious e-mail. The door opens to reveal a dozen guests milling around a large table that gleams with elegant stemware, crisp white plates and printed menus of the evening's meal. Wearing matching chef's coats, New York Bite Club hosts Alicia and Daniel greet Justin and Rebecca at the door while a waitress takes their coats and pours Kir Royale cocktails. Their underground dinner adventure is about to begin.

The illicit trend of clandestine dinner clubs—gourmet meals cooked by amateur foodies in private residences—has been quietly creeping across the U.S. over the past couple of years; the most "famous," Ghetto Gourmet in San Francisco, has become a popular franchise that has inspired offshoots in L.A., Atlanta and Chicago. The people who run these clubs aren't naïve to the fact that they could be busted by authorities for bypassing health department rules and selling

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A night at Bite Club (clockwise from top left): Carpaccio, romance, marrow and a foie gras pear.

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food without a license. To stay within the gray area of legality, all alcohol is “free” and dinner is paid for through a set “donation.” In return, guests get a multicourse meal, often made with local, seasonal ingredients and paired with wine or cocktails, plus the allure of doing something slightly furtive.

By moving venues and issuing warnings about tipping off the neighbors, hosts protect themselves, their locations and their guests. People find out about them by word of mouth or on Web sites like curiousfork.net (which acts as a clearinghouse for all things secret-dinner and asks the question: “Is it underground if we all know about it?”). Currently, at least five underground supper clubs are regularly operating in New York: Bite Club and Homeslice West in Manhattan, Coach Peaches and The Whisk & the Ladle in Brooklyn, and Sunday Night Dinner in Queens.

Both Homeslice and Sunday Night Dinner have potential TV or book deals in the works, and Becky, who runs the Upper West Side club Homeslice West, thinks the increasing publicity could bring it all to a head. Referring to the legal home-cooked meals served to paying tourists in countries like Italy and Spain, Becky says with a defiant grin, “The authorities are either going to have to accept us into the culture, as other countries do, or shut us down.”

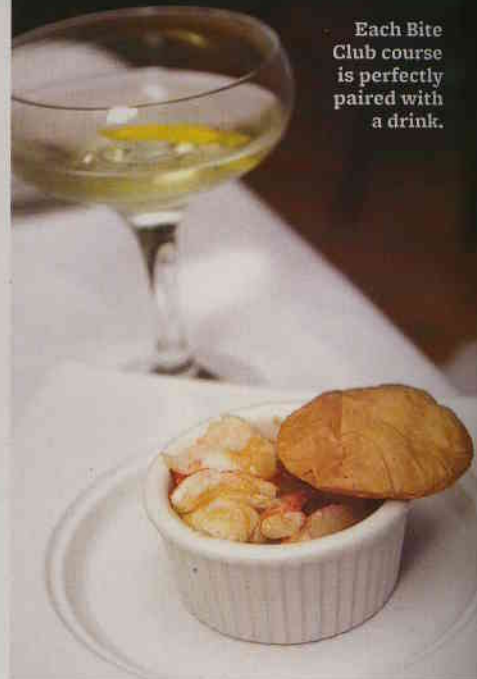
New York Bite Club, the dinner party Justin attended, is unusual in terms of

how chi-chi and professional it is. In the past, guests sat at separate tables—which hosts Alicia and Daniel refer to as “two-tops” and “four-tops”—but communal tables are now also an option. To ensure that the operation stays relatively secret, they don’t even tell their assistants exactly what’s going on. “My receptionist, who accepts the deposits, must think I’m a drug dealer,” Alicia, a petite brunette, says with a laugh.

Alicia and Daniel, who met about four years ago on a business trip (she’s in retail, he’s in wholesale), aren’t formally trained chefs but have always loved good food. “We ate our way across the U.S., from Vegas to New York, on a road trip. The thing with Bite Club is, we just wanted to cook. And even though we host all these dinners, we also have 15 of our friends over once a month to eat for free,” Daniel says.

The couple use a friend’s apartment in a mixed-use Chelsea building as Bite Club’s twice-weekly home base because it’s extra-private. “The first time I came over here, my friend was bouncing a basketball and none of the neighbors could even hear it,” says the 20-something Alicia, whose goal is to eventually operate a nightly supper club out of a townhouse.

The sparsely furnished apartment makes for a calm space, akin to the dining room at Per Se, allowing diners to focus on food that is expertly envisioned, timed and plated. Although none of the 30 or so guests ever go home hungry, the portions of the \$125, eight-course tasting menu—including purple cauliflower panna



Each Bite Club course is perfectly paired with a drink.

cotta topped with American sturgeon caviar—are restrained.

“The meal was really lovingly thought through, and the venison carpaccio was excellent,” says stylist Olga, 34, who attended Bite Club with her boyfriend for their one-year anniversary. “It’s nice for something special, but at [\$250 for the two of us], I don’t know if I would return.”

Alicia and Daniel insist they’re giving people value for money. “The wine alone is worth \$75. We could charge the same price and spend only \$50 per plate, but that’s not what we’re about,” says 30-something Daniel. “It took us a year and about \$15,000 to get Bite Club started and we’re still not turning a profit, especially as we just bought a sous vide machine.”

“If you look at the Taco Bell situation,” says Tamara Reynolds, 39, referring to the infamous news story last spring that showed more than a dozen rats scurrying around a fast food restaurant in the West Village, “the health department clearly has other stuff to worry about.” So throwing caution to the wind, Tamara, a spiky-haired redhead who is the director of special events for Morrell and Co., and her friend Zora O’Neill, 35, are the only undercover chefs willing to offer their full names. They’ve been moonlighting as hosts of Sunday Night Dinner in Astoria for the past two years with a casual grab-a-seat attitude, complete with mismatched vintage plates, a handwritten menu tacked to the wall, free-flowing wine and copious family-style dishes.

Twice a month, Tamara and Zora will sit down with the guests for onion soup with cider vinegar, duck stock and toast, then jump up to serve heaping bowls of roasted Jerusalem artichokes with red onion, garlic and black olives. Depending on the season, the 20 or so guests will either get a meal and an after-dinner showing of, say, *Shaun of the Dead*, projected on a blank wall in Tamara’s backyard in Astoria.

The pair started Sunday Night Dinner in 2005, after realizing they were spending more money on parties for pals than they were on rent. So they asked people to chip in, and soon their friends were bringing other friends—and the club took off. Sunday Night Dinner dates regularly sell out two hours after they’re announced and often have a waiting list 10 deep, probably because the parties really do feel like dinner at a friend’s house. It’s cozy and comfortable, with a we’re-all-in-this-together vibe.

The food is often inspired by Zora’s job as a travel writer. “Tamara and I took a trip to Turkey together, and two years later, tried to re-create this Turkish grilled chicken that was made with—of all things—ketchup and minced onions. But that was nothing compared with the time we decided to roast a pig and a lamb on homemade spits. People had to hand-crank them



Laidback Sunday Night Dinner offers a sense of humor, garden-fresh food and fun hosts Tamara and Zora.



for hours,” Zora says.

“Our thing is that we want to introduce people to food that they’ve never tried before,” says Becky, who’s in her 20s and from Texas, and runs Homeslice West with her pal Hayden. “Since our spin is Southern, that’s pretty easy to do in New York. Most people haven’t heard of a Hot Brown or Hoppin’ John.” (For the Yankees: A Hot Brown is an open-faced turkey and bacon sandwich slathered in cheesy béchamel sauce, and Hoppin’ John is Southern-style rice and beans.) And their \$50 twice-a-month dinners always feature Hayden’s mom’s recipe for mouthwatering biscuits with honey butter.

The pair, who met while working at an ad agency, host their dinners at various locations on the Upper West Side. They seem to straddle the elegance of Bite Club and the family atmosphere

of Sunday Night Dinner—the tables, chairs and plates match, and Becky and Hayden have created a community of fans who return often. “Guests are actually offering to host the parties now. Seeing some of these venues, people will say to me, ‘You must have a lot of rich friends,’” says Becky, laughing. But they can make almost any place work. “If you have a decent-size bedroom, we can move everything out of it and fit people in there,” adds Hayden, who’s also 20-something and grew up in North Carolina.

What all of these dinner hosts have in common is that they’re inspired by a love of good food rather than some get-rich-quick scheme. “I just want people to be inspired by it and to have dinner parties of their own,” says Tamara. “People want community, but we all spend so much time working and it’s not like anyone joins the Elks anymore.”

Les, a 40-year-old engineer and Bite Club diner, agrees. “For me, it’s really all about meeting interesting people. You can’t really do that at a restaurant, so it’s completely different. It’s not about getting membership into a private restaurant—if I wanted that, I could go to Soho House and pay a ridiculous amount of money.”

Whether it’s because of the alcohol, the common interest in food, being part of something secret or a combination of all three, by the end of the night, guests are stuffed, drunk and happy—no matter what dinner they’ve been to. They’ll begin exchanging e-mail addresses and planning to meet up again.

“I’m going back because there was this guy I was flirting with and I haven’t gotten up the nerve to actually ask him out,” says Sam, 31, a literary agent and repeat Sunday Night Dinner guest.

Homeslice West’s Hayden has seen that before. “It’s great because singles can come and not feel intimidated,” she says. “It’s a safe environment and it’s something fun to do. You never know who you’re going to meet. In fact, we’ve even had a few love connections.”