



Eats, Online

By Brian Hallenbeck, Day Arts Writer

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When it comes to dining out, the future is fast approaching. Actually, it may have already arrived at pizzettamystic.com, the Web site of the downtown Mystic restaurant Christopher Owens opened this summer amid a studied lack of fanfare. Owens, who describes himself as “an artist who shouldn’t even be in business,” sunk his marketing budget into the site, a move some recent analyses suggest was savvy.

Results of a national survey by AIS Media, an Atlanta-based Internet consulting firm, show that 89 percent of the more than 2,500 consumers who answered an e-mail questionnaire said they research a restaurant online before visiting it. Of those, 57 percent said they check out the restaurant’s own Web site.

In companion polling of nearly 6,000 U.S. restaurants, 280 of which responded, AIS found that 89 percent maintain Web sites.

Thomas Harpointner, AIS Media’s chief executive officer, says he was surprised at how high that last percentage was given that so many restaurant Web sites are rudimentary and hard to find via Internet search engines.

On pizzettamystic.com, Owens has offered up a site designed to do far more than promote his restaurant. Indeed, it touts his world view – he’s big on the environment and support for local merchants and nonprofits – and has a link to a social networking site, videos and slideshows.

Not every restaurant owner needs to roll out a site like that, but, quite simply, “If they don’t have a site, they need one,” Simon A. Flynn, president and CEO of the Connecticut Restaurant Association, says. Part of the reason is that owners can solicit e-mail addresses through their Web site, building databases that are a means to connecting with customers – individually, when necessary.

The AIS survey also found that many restaurant patrons welcome coupons and other promotions sent via e-mail, check Web sites for up-to-date menus that include prices, and crave online reviews by fellow epicureans and professional reviewers.

Still, it’s premature to say a restaurant’s marketing should be entirely focused on the Web, says Jon Kodama, whose JTK Management Corp. owns three restaurants in Mystic, one in old Saybrook and one on Block Island.

“It’s going in that direction but I’m not sure it’s there yet,” he says. “If you’re planning a trip, going somewhere you’ve never been before, you may want to go online. But a lot of it (choosing a restaurant) is casual, last minute.”

Kodama says generations of patrons have been frequenting his Steak Loft, in Mystic, which he opened in 1973, and Dock & Dine in Old Saybrook, which operated for decades before he bought it more than 20 years ago. Presumably, few of the regulars discovered those restaurants while surfing the ‘net.

Kodama, whose restaurants’ Web sites can be accessed through www.jtkmanagement.com, says he doesn’t e-mail patrons coupons or newsletters. He says providing quality food and service is still the key to success.

“I don’t think Web activity is surpassing that in importance,” he says, adding, “If you’re smart, you’ll cover your bases.”

The Web sites of most restaurants in the region can be accessed through the Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut’s www.chamberct.com and www.mysticcountry.com, which is maintained by Eastern Regional Tourism District and the Mystic Coast & Country Travel Association.

The Connecticut Restaurant Association and DT Media Group, a Waterbury advertising agency, maintain RestaursCT.com, a Web site that enables consumers to search for state restaurants by name, county, city, type of cuisine and keyword. It lists more than 1,300 eateries, including 125 in New London County, providing links to the Web sites of those that have them.

The site comes up first on a Google search of “Connecticut restaurants,” notes Bob DeZinno, a DT Media principal and a member of the restaurant association’s board of directors. He says the site’s managers plan to promote it in a partnership with network television station that could make the site “a household name.”

Even small restaurants need to invest in a Web site, which can cost as little as \$500 to \$600, says DeZinno, whose agency manages sites for 30 restaurants.

“Years ago, we’d tell a client you’ve got to have a four-color-brochure,” he says, “Now, a Web site does the same thing electronically, and it can be kept current and fresh. And through Web portals, people can get at your brochure.”

Increasingly, larger, up-scale restaurants, particularly those in big cities, are finding it’s worth the expense to link up with sites that handle real-time reservations. OpenTable Inc., a leader in the field, launched www.OpenTables.com eight years ago, serving some 25 restaurants in San Francisco Bay Area. It now serves more than 7,000 restaurants, including 50 in Connecticut.

Reservations at four restaurants in the region can be made on the site – Octagon at Mystic Marriott Hotel & Spa in Groton; Terra Mar Grille at Saybrook Point Inn & Spa; and Big Bubba’s

BBQ and Michael Jordan's Steakhouse, both at Mohegan Sun. OpenTable charges restaurants \$1 per person for every reservation made through the Web site.

As the AIS survey indicated, restaurant patrons are keen on online reviews, though relatively few restaurant Web sites have them – yet.

Though it's unlikely a restaurant would post anything other than glowing review, such endorsements tend to lead credibility to a site, marketers say.

"I've never seen a negative review (on a restaurant's Web site)," says DeZinno, the advertising executive whose agency posts no reviews on RestaurantsCT.com. "But I must say, every time we talk about what's next, we talk about the possibility of review."