



Top left: Kate Strassman, bottom left: K.R.A.K., top center and right: scenes from Jen Garbee's fave renegade restaurants, bottom right: Supper Underground

kitchen confidential

RENEGADE CHEFS DISH ON HOW TO HOST A SECRET SUPPER CLUB

PUTTING THE ART back in dinner parties, underground restaurants are popping up in backyards, warehouses, and living rooms across the country. By charging a "donation" fee and inviting friends, friends of friends, and even strangers via word of mouth and the Web, gals are turning regular dinner gatherings into eclectic, well-funded social affairs. If you know your way around the kitchen and have an itch to entertain, you can throw a secret supper of your own! Whether you serve a three-course, \$20 BYOB meal of fancy mac 'n' cheese, meatloaf, and banana pudding, or a \$100 eight-course tasting menu with tartare, confit, and wine, organizing an underground supper club can give you the chance to try your hand at being the chef of your very own "restaurant."

Rebel Meal

The anti-restaurant movement isn't new, but it's recently exploded—eating in someone else's home is the new eating out. "It's a means to revitalize the idea of a dinner party," says Norah (who, like others interviewed for this article, prefers to remain anonymous) of New York's **Whisk & Ladle Supper Club** (www.thewhiskandladle.com), which she hosts regularly in her Williamsburg loft. "Ev-

eryone goes out to eat these days, and very few of my friends cook," she explains. "But the formality of the dinner party creates a homespun community." In addition to eating an awesome meal in an intimate environment, it's this sense of community that motivates not only the hosts of renegade restaurants but also the diners who seek them out. For those who like to play hostess, it's the perfect way to plan a gathering without the money drain. "I love to throw dinner parties, but I can't afford to do the kind of entertaining I want to, meaning 5 courses for 12 people," says Hannah Calvert. So the corporate consultant by day launched **Supper Underground** (www.supperunderground.com), which serves up to 30 diners in backyards and market halls around Austin, TX.

Most renegade restaurateurs, in general, are skilled home chefs with a day job and a strong social bent, but cooking experience runs the gamut. Stacie Pierce, of San Francisco's art-driven **OPEN Restaurant** (www.openrestaurant.org), is a Chez Pannise pastry chef, while **Chicks with Knives Sustainable Supper Club** (www.chickswithknives.com) in L.A. is run by community-garden organizer Rachael and cooking-school grad Pace. Norah, a legal pro by day, considers Whisk and Ladle her

SUPPER UNDERGROUND PHOTO BY RANDY HO

"consolation prize for going to law school instead of culinary school." While you don't need actual restaurant experience, a love of food is critical, and it certainly helps to have a culinary repertoire, ace networking muscle, and a bit of spunk.

Dinner Is Served

Anyone who's thrown a casual dinner party knows the amount of work involved, so turning your living room into an unofficial restaurant? That requires much, much more. "Start planning early, and enlist the help of anyone who shows an interest," says Pierce. Choosing a date and location is a good place to begin. While some ladies serve up meals in their own homes, many rebel kitchens rove, adding to the mystery (and eluding the attention of the health department). A lot of underground chefs keep their identities and locations secret, since one of the perks (and risks) of cooking on the down-low is avoiding the expense and paperwork of taxes and food-safety permits that legit restaurants face. When establishing your courses, Calvert stresses simplicity. "Regardless of

how creative your menu is, be sure the food is easy to eat. Although we base our menu on seasonal ingredients from farmers' markets, discount grocery stores and of course Costco are also great." Decide whom to open your restaurant to, then take reservations from folks you know, people referred by friends, or, as your renegade restaurant gets more established, even strangers who've heard the word through foodie blogs and mailing lists.

By the day of your event, the more prep work you've done, the more smoothly your restaurant will run. Kate Strassman, a Milwaukee native who runs **K.R.A.K., Kate's Renegade Aboveground Kitchen** (www.chezkate.com), out of her Brooklyn apartment, highlights organization, cleanliness, and practice. "Make everything as ahead-of-time as you can. And give yourself an hour before guests arrive to relax. Enjoy the quiet of your sparkling, set-up house with food ready to go in the oven," she says. "And have a cocktail!"

It's not all wine-braised short ribs and rosewater crême brûlée, however. "Please get familiar with basic food

safety and sanitation," pleads Rachael of Chicks with Knives. Used cooking-school texts are helpful, as are one-to-two-day catering-licensing and food-handling classes, typically available through state licensing agencies.

Hostess With the Mostest

"The key to a really great 'underground' is feeling like a guest in someone's home," says food writer Jenn Garbee. (She should know: her recent book, *Secret Suppers*, profiles 10 renegade restaurants nationwide.) That means being attentive to the details of hospitality. How to deliver? Support staff is crucial, so tap your food network and enthusiastic friends to find gracious hostesses who will greet guests, offer drinks, serve your delicious eats, and perhaps most important, make introductions so your guests feel comfortable to chat and mingle. "Nothing makes me happier," says Calvert, "than seeing a table of 30 people, who didn't know each other a few hours before, laughing, talking, and enjoying an amazing meal together." [TRACIE BROOM]