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Waiter, We'll Have the Food Event .

By SARAH NASSAUER

They arrive in groups, late in the evening and can make a restaurant seem like the cool place to be. Sarah Nassauer joins Lunch Break with a look at the rise of the late-night millennial foodies. Photo: Stephen Yang for The Wall Street Journal.

Owners of popular Miami restaurant Yardbird Southern Table and Bar faced a challenge of many restaurateurs: how to bring in more of the "late-night, foodie, millennial crowd," says John Kunkel, chief executive of 50 Eggs Inc., which owns Yardbird and other restaurants in Miami, Fla.

To woo diners in their 20s and early 30s, Lincoln Restaurant in Portland, Ore., hosts special evenings with local purveyors. Instead of putting young customers at the bad table near the bathroom, writing them off as McDonald's and Doritos fans out for a rare good meal, more restaurants are catering to a new type of young diner that wants to be wowed and loves elk heart tartare.

They tend to travel in groups, eat late in the evening and can lend restaurants a cool cachet, attracting more patrons of all ages. At Yardbird, diners drawn by $26 fried chicken served with Tabasco honey and "big 'ol Cheddar waffles" usually started to dwindle after 11 p.m., a no-no for a bustling spot.

At Hanjan, a Manhattan eatery, the Korean ramen is served only after 10 p.m. It appeals to a crowd that likes food with a story. The restaurant created a "midnight chef's table" hoping to attract people now in their 20s and early 30s—a generation often called millennials. Now, every Friday night, younger eaters pour in for unusual food cooked by a visiting chef into the wee hours. The chef chats casually about each dish. Cellphone cameras flash. "I've only made it to two of my midnight chef dinners," says the 42-year old Mr. Kunkel, citing the late hour.

Restaurants say these diners not only are very demanding about the food, they want to know the story behind what's on a plate and are lured by rarefied experiences. Often they want something seemingly elusive to brag about on Twitter and Instagram. It is a shift in American eating habits that is influencing the direction of fast-food chains as well as the best restaurants.

For "real, genuine, clever food it hardly matters to me how much it costs or how long I have to wait to get in," says 30-year-old Cassie Lilly, a nanny and student who lives in Basking Ridge, N.J. She spent three years trying to score a table with the online reservation system for the fried chicken dinner offered to a few tables a night at Momofuku Noodle Bar. The Manhattan restaurant is one of several owned by chef David Chang, perhaps the grandfather of young dining trends (if a 35-year-old can be called a grandfather). The meal is two whole fried chickens—one southern style, one Korean style—that come with sides like mu shu pancakes, radishes and herbs intended for four to eight people.

At Hanjan, a Korean restaurant in Manhattan, the spicy ramen—cooked for 12 hours to make a flavorful broth—is only available after 10 p.m. When the noodle soup appears, 20-somethings arrive and replace an older crowd of neighborhood locals, says chef and owner Hooni Kim. "That wasn't our intent," he says. "If it was, I would be a genius."

Chef Laurent Tourondel at the Arlington Club in New York with the 72-ounce 'cowboy steak' for groups available only after 8:30 p.m.

Younger customers are few and far between when Lincoln Restaurant in Portland, Ore., co-hosts food-and-wine pairing dinners with vineyards, says David Welch, co-owner of the high-end eatery that serves a hybrid of Northwest and Italian cuisines. But a pairing event with local small-batch ice cream shop, Salt & Straw, "attracted a much younger demographic," says Mr. Welch. "The wine dinner has been done so many times," he says. Whereas "collaborative diners with unique purveyors," tend to interest younger guests.

Millennials now outnumber baby boomers, but over the past five years they started visiting restaurants less than boomers, according to data from NPD Group, a consumer research company. They are "going to require a great deal of attention to get them back into restaurants," says Bonnie Riggs, a restaurant analyst at NPD.

Seasoning the steak

Restaurants have long counted on this responsibility-free group to be an easy sell for happy-hour specials or pricey appetizers. Now they are trying hard to please a young patron who is more demanding but with less disposable income. These consumers grew up immersed in restaurant TV shows and celebrity-chef culture. Attention to organic food and labeling that promotes where food comes from became mainstream during their childhoods.

One way restaurants try to attract groups of younger diners is by turning a meal into an "event." Arlington Club, a New York steak house with a sushi bar, this week started selling a shareable, $555, 72-ounce version of a rib-eye known as a "cowboy steak," served with a 16-ounce lobster tail. Only available after 8:30 p.m., the restaurant will limit sales to eight each night, displaying numbers on the steaks and serving them on a smoking bed of herbs as the dish is whisked through the dining room. Younger guests "go for the wow items," says Paul Goldstein, a partner at TAO Group, co-owner of the Arlington Club, which generally attracts a slightly older clientele.

The steak is served on a fragrant, smoking bed of herbs, to tempt other diners.

Restaurants say they have to strike a balance to serve all demographics. "We serve turkey eggs," says Mr. Welch in Portland. "But we always have a baked hen dish that is very traditional," he says.

Music can be a point of friction. At Sweetgreen, a 17-location chain, some older customers at its suburban restaurants didn't like the upbeat indie-rock and hip-hop soundtrack. Chief Executive and Partner Nathaniel Ru, who describes the salad and yogurt chain guests as people who "go to yoga, but still go out with friends at night," says those spots started playing mellower music like Al Green.

With millennials, anything that hints of "trying too hard" or crass profit seeking doesn't work, says Graham Elliot, chef and owner of three Chicago restaurants, one with two Michelin stars, who began appearing as a judge on "MasterChef" in 2010.

After his TV gig, his staff noticed comments on food blogs and review sites calling him, "Mr. L.A." and claiming he wasn't as hands-on in his restaurants, says Mr. Elliot. "The truth is I film for eight weeks and the other 44 weeks a year I'm in Chicago," he says. To stay in tune with younger guests, he stays active on social media. He says he opened his newest restaurant, Graham Elliot Bistro, in part to appeal to a young crowd looking for a fun, casual atmosphere with lower prices.

Failure to impress this demographic can lead to lousy posts on social media. Thirty- and 40-something guests "are not going to blog about it or post it up somewhere, but the 20s all do," says Mr. Kim of Hanjan: "They keep you on your toes."

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