DISH DIRECTORY — GUIDE

How restaurant reservations work

Restaurant bookings run through the restaurant site, a booking platform or a phone call. Learn how each channel works and what to do when plans change.

Updated October 9, 2026

A reservation is a simple deal: the restaurant holds a table, and you arrive on time. The mechanics behind that deal vary. Some rooms take bookings months out. Others keep the whole dining room for walk-ins. Knowing the channels and the rules helps you get the table you want.

The three booking channels

Most restaurants accept bookings through one or more of three channels. The restaurant website often links directly to its booking page. This channel usually shows the same availability as the others, and some rooms release extra tables there first.

Booking platforms list many restaurants in one place. They let you search by date, time and party size across a city. The trade-off is coverage: a room appears only if it pays to list there, so the absence of a restaurant from a platform says nothing about its quality.

The phone still matters. Small rooms, large parties and special requests often need a call. Phone lines also help when online systems show no tables. Cancellations happen every day, and a host can offer a table that never reaches the website.

Timing and party size

Book popular rooms early. Fine-dining rooms in big cities can fill weeks ahead for Friday and Saturday. Neighborhood spots often need only a day or two. As a rule, the smaller the room and the more famous the kitchen, the earlier you should book.

Party size changes the rules. Tables for two turn over fast, so pairs find seats easily. Parties of six or more need planning on both sides. Many rooms cap online bookings at six or eight guests and ask larger groups to call. Very large parties may get a set menu or a private room with a deposit.

Deposits, cards and cancellations

Tasting-menu rooms and popular small restaurants increasingly ask for a deposit or card details. The deposit usually applies to your check. The card serves as a guarantee against no-shows. Read the terms when you book: cancellation windows range from a few hours to a full week.

Cancel as soon as plans change, even inside the window. A table freed in the morning can still sell at dinner, and the host may waive the fee. Never simply fail to show. No-shows cost the restaurant the whole evening for that table, and repeat offenders lose booking privileges on some platforms.

Walk-ins and waitlists

Many good restaurants keep tables for walk-ins. Arriving early on a weekday is the simplest strategy. Some rooms run a waitlist by phone or text message, so you can browse nearby instead of standing at the door. Ask the host for an honest wait estimate and a way to hold your place.

When you travel, check listings before you fly. This directory lists restaurants by city with booking details on each page. Note which rooms take reservations and which reward an early arrival, and plan each evening around that mix.

Frequently asked questions

Do I need a reservation for a casual restaurant?

Often not. Counter-service spots and many casual rooms seat walk-ins. Busy weekends and parties of six or more are the cases where a booking helps.

What happens if I miss my reservation?

The restaurant may give the table away after a short grace period. Rooms that take deposits or card details may charge a fee, so cancel ahead when plans change.