

Secret Suppers

Underground dinner clubs offer fresh food with a touch of mystery



By Tina Chadwick

Secret supper clubs turn the idea of fine dining on its ear. You pay top dollar, but you won't know where you're going, what you're eating or who is going to be there until a day before. And if you cancel, you're off the list and most likely charged as well.

Yet many wait as long as a year for this type of treatment as part of the allure of the underground supper club. The consensus is that the food and experience are worth the wait and angst.

Carols Ricque and Cathy Weber tried for a full year to get a seat at the sought-after **Prelude to Staplehouse** (staplehouse.com).

"It was terribly hard to get in," Weber says. "We knew they sent out an email with the first 10 to respond getting seats. We would reply as quick as two minutes and that still wasn't fast enough." Finally, they landed two spots.

Asking about that wait in relation to the experience, Ricque says it was worth the wait and the money. "We would – and will – try again to go. It was a very cool evening and you really felt like it was something special."

Created by Ryan and Jenny Hidinger, **Prelude to Staplehouse** was started as a primer for the restaurant the duo plan to open. Currently, they host the event at their own residence.

"Prelude to Staplehouse is our way to build a name for ourselves," says Ryan Hidinger. "We very much want to be the next great thing, and not just a flash in the pan."

Jenny Levinson, right, owner of Buckhead's **Souper Jenny** (souperjennyatl.com), also uses her elusive events to market her restaurant. She's been hosting events for nearly three years after reading an article

about the movement in New York.

"I'm an entertainer anyway," Levinson says. "It just appealed to me as something fun to do."

Depending on the venue, Levinson hosts 30 to 40 people at an undisclosed location. Some of her settings have been a graveyard, an art gallery and a building rooftop.

Probably the most "secret" underground dining experience is **rogueApron** (rogueapron.wordpress.com), which is run by a woman who will only identify herself as Lady Rogue.

"My work with rogueApron is about creating tangible opportunities for people to interact and form friendships," Lady Rogue says. "Interpersonal connections are the foundation of a healthy local economy, and it's my pleasure to put together events featuring Georgia-grown food."

Lady Rogue describes her dining event as MacGyver meets Iron Chef. "We work backwards from a theme and design a menu that can be produced by volunteers without access to fancy equipment."

Esther Andrew, founder of **For Food's Sake** (forfoodssake.org), names this as her goal for serving her secret dinners, "Every event is opportunity to build awareness and create a consciousness about our food choices while getting back in touch with farmers."

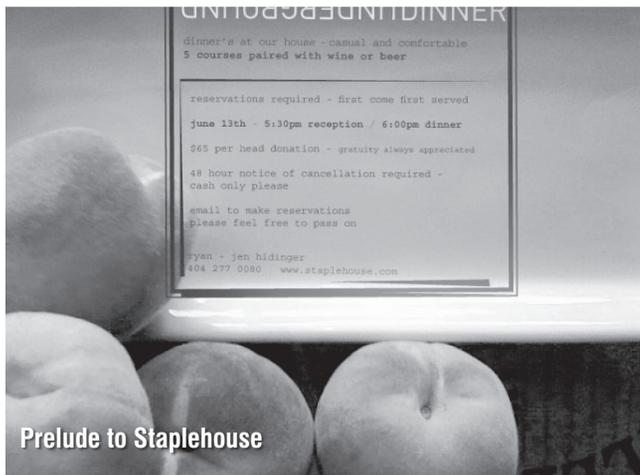
All four secret supper clubs have local-grown and farmer relationships as keystones to their operations. All menus are developed according to what's in season during collaboration with the chosen chef and farmer.

After her first time attending, Molly Baroco had this to say about her evening: "For me, it felt special – even more than going out to dinner. It's amazing service, you get an explanation of the food and, you get to be close and see the passion of the chef – it's something you won't get anywhere else."



Lady Rogue offers this motivation: "I think we all harbor the sneaking suspicion that there is something really, really cool going on just around the corner that we don't know about. These sorts of dinners give the every person an opportunity to tap into arts, food, and performance communities that they may not intersect with otherwise."

Bon appetite and, in this case, bonne chance, too. **IN**



Prelude to Staplehouse



For Food's Sake



Oct. 23-24

The 9th annual **Taste of Atlanta** is set for Saturday, Oct. 23, and Sunday, Oct. 24, at Technology Square. With the city's most renowned restaurateurs whipping up gourmet delights and live cooking demonstrations on three stages, patrons are sure to find their culinary pleasure within the 10-block food festival, located in the heart of Midtown.

The highlights:

✓ **More than 80 Restaurants:** Experience a taste of Craft, Iberian Pig, New York Prime and Tuk Tuk to name a few. Patrons can also get a taste of up-and-coming hot spots new to the Atlanta restaurant scene, such as Farmstead 303 and Goin' Coastal.

✓ **Farm to Festival Village:** Learn about Atlanta's local sustainable movement from Atlanta restaurateurs and local farmers.

✓ **Live Cooking Demonstrations:** Techniques from the Woodfire Grill's Executive Chef Kevin Gillespie, JCT Kitchen and Bar's Executive Chef William "Ford" Fry, Pink Power demo by The Hill's Executive Chef Hilary White and Pacci Ristorante's Executive Chef Keira Moritz.

✓ **Family Food Zone:** Amica Insurance presents this family-fun area for future generation chefs-in-training. Enjoy cooking demos including The Meal Makeover Moms and food-focused arts and crafts activities.

✓ **Wine, Beer and Cocktail Experience:** VIP ticket holders can taste over 100 wines and 50 craft beers in the Tasting Tents or enjoy seminars hosted by Gil Kuhlers and Bob Townsend, Atlanta's leading beverage experts.

✓ **Barcraft Competition:** Satisfy your inner mixologist and sample cocktails from Atlanta's top bartenders as you watch them compete for the title of Atlanta's Best Bartender. Open to VIP ticket holders only.

✓ **Inside the Food Studio:** Come experience the world of the professional chef and discover the secrets of his craft. Hosted by Atlanta's own Tom Sullivan, patrons will enjoy tastes and beverages in an intimate setting while learning valuable cooking skills and insight into the Atlanta restaurant scene.

Ticket Information: General admission tickets available before Oct. 22 at midnight for \$25. Tickets are \$30 at the gate. A limited number of VIP Tickets priced at \$75 are available for those 21 and up. Purchase with Ticket Alternative, on www.TasteofAtlanta.com or by calling (877) 725-8849. Tickets are also available at Cook's Warehouse and Whole Foods Market locations. Visit www.TasteofAtlanta.com for a full list of ticket outlets throughout Atlanta. **IN**