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## Deep underground

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**Guerilla dining sets a new pace in the food scene. Traditional establishments would do well to take note**

They have no signage. They don't advertise. And, their seating space is limited. In fact, it's like dining in a friend's home.

Welcome to a new phenomenon making waves in the culinary world in Australia – underground or "guerilla" dining.

British celebrity chef Jamie Oliver lifted the lid on the trend in a TV special on secret supper clubs in New York last year. Since then, such exclusive dining spots have sprung up across Australia's eastern seaboard.



Michael Fantuz is behind underground dining spot Tablefor20 in Sydney. (Check out the blog, [www.tablefor20.blogspot.com](http://www.tablefor20.blogspot.com).) While not in his home, the eatery is based in a converted terrace building in the inner-city suburb of Surry Hills, with an open space downstairs with two long tables, seating 44, and an upstairs watering hole, known as Sticky Bar. The only sign of activity outside is a business card holder out the front. Diners text or call to book a seat at the venue, open Wednesdays to Saturdays.

Fantuz, who has worked in the restaurant trade since he was 17, including as a food and beverage director at the Ritz-Carlton internationally, said a "combination" of factors led to him starting the venture four years ago. "I used to have a lot of friends and regulars from my previous restaurant, who'd come over and bring a bottle, and I'd cook dinner for them. It was very low-key and just at home. (Then) some friends of mine really encouraged me to do it on a 'larger scale', so to speak. I'd been to a few places that roll in this type of way in Tuscany and Milan. I didn't know if Sydney would be ready for it. (But) the numbers stacked up – and the passion."

The risk appears to have paid off. When we contacted Fantuz in July, both Tablefor20 and Sticky Bar were booked out for the entire year. The Italian-style eatery offers diners a three-course, set menu, which changes daily depending on "how the weather is, what we feel like doing and what's in season", according to Fantuz.

The eatery has a real communal dining feel. "All the food is served in platters, which get put down between every five people. People just pass around the food and share, like how I ate at home," Fantuz enthuses. While he originally cooked all the dishes each night, he's since handed the reins over to Steven Zielke – a "young, energetic chef, who enjoys home-cooked, robust Italian meals". Fantuz says: "We're using fresh ingredients, as opposed to cooking so many things in advance or pre-cooking and then just 'finishing off', like conventional kitchens do. (Doing that) you can lose that desire for actually cooking food, as opposed to just finishing it."

Another place keeping in step with this trend is Bite Club, which is actually based in a home abode in the well-heeled Sydney suburb of Woollahra. (Check out [biteclubsydney.blogspot.com](http://biteclubsydney.blogspot.com)). The venture was started by interior designer Debra Cronin, who owns the pad, but is now managed by housemate Virginia Hookham.

From the street, the building is fairly nondescript but, inside, there's antique French furniture and intricate, high ceilings and, in the courtyard, a trickling fountain. "We are very underground. Our neighbours don't even know what we're doing," Hookham quips.

The eatery's blog is updated daily, so potential diners know how many seats are left at its degustation dinners, which cater for up to 16 guests several times a month. There are singles events and open-to-all-foodies events. On the popularity of the venture, Hookham says: "I think that people are just looking for something different – a bit of intrigue."

As for what other establishments can glean from the success of these underground dining spots? Fantuz says they've put the spotlight back on the romance of hospitality. "The first thing (in hospitality) is how you serve and treat the customer – it's not how refined you put down a plate in front of them. It's how you make them feel first – how you anticipate their needs, acknowledge your regulars by name, know what they like to drink, and have it there before they ask for it. There is a romance to genuine hospitality."

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