

Restaurant goers sign up to pre-paid dining experience

TRAVEL & LEISURE

News analysis

Demand-based pricing adds twist to a new formula for eating out, writes **Rose Jacobs**

Book a table, turn up, order, eat – then settle your bill: it's a tried and trusted formula at restaurants around the world. But in recent years, private supper clubs in London have turned the order upside down, asking diners to pay in advance for set meals – and now two Americans are trying to spread the idea.

Late this year or early next, Nick Kokonas and Grant Achatz – the men behind Alinea, a restaurant rated number seven in the world by Restaurant magazine – will open Next Restaurant in Chicago, a venture drawing on business models from industries as varied as aerospace and London's West End.

Like theatre goers booking seats, diners will buy tickets to meals rather than pay afterwards. And like

the US (with almost 10,000 people registering interest in a ticket), and the popularity of the private supper-club model in the UK, suggests diners are open to innovation that goes beyond cuisine.

The UK restaurant industry is embracing that – in part because it has to. During the recession, many chains relied on vouchers to maintain volumes, but at the expense of margins. Now, as they seek to wean customers off those deals, they need to find more creative ways of offering value. "Pricing is one of the hot

'Restaurant margins are narrow. You have two no-shows and our day is shot'

topics in the restaurant industry these days," says Rafi Mohammed, author of *The Art of Pricing*.

Groupon, a website that negotiates deals for users by leveraging group buying power, has convinced as many as 1m Britons to pay



Upfront: Les Trois Garçons in London's Shoreditch has signed up to the pre-pay model