

## New social networks connect cooks and diners

April 23 2014, by Michael Warren

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In this April 12, 2014, photo, Chef Ezequiel De La Torre, left top, talks to customers in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The website [www.cookapp.com](http://www.cookapp.com) was launched in March 2013 and recently moved its headquarters from Buenos Aires to New York City. It works like a matchmaker, arranging intimate gourmet dinners between strangers. Chefs list when and where they will prepare particular meals; diners book what interests them, pay upfront via the app, then just show up and enjoy. (AP Photo/Natacha Pisarenko)

If the latest development in culinary social media catches on, the

trendiest restaurants may no longer be restaurants.

A growing number of apps and websites are taking the traditional chef-diner relationship out of established eateries and into private homes. Cookapp, for example, is just the latest to launch in the U.S., connecting adventurous diners with independent chefs—and even just ambitious amateur cooks—willing to host dinners at their homes and other offbeat locations.

Like its peers EatWith and Feastly, Cookapp is taking a bite from the edible side of the "shared economy," where so-called peer-to-peer businesses are disrupting established industries and giving headaches to municipal regulators and tax collectors. Other non-food apps in this realm include Uber and Lyft, which match private drivers with people needing rides, and VRBO and Airbnb, which help people turn their homes into vacation rentals.

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For chefs, it offers a chance to experiment without the hassle, expense and risk of maintaining a restaurant. For diners, it can be the ultimate culinary adventure.

Tomas Bermudez came up with the idea for Cookapp while living in Rio de Janeiro, where he struggled to meet people. So he and his sister hatched the Cookapp idea, then set up a website and began knocking on the doors of cooks and chefs back home in Argentina.

"We said, 'Is it cool for you to invite people to your house whenever you

want?' And they loved it," he said. "We proved it in Buenos Aires, so we're thinking let's go to New York, and if it works in New York, it works worldwide."

Passionate cooks have long hosted open dinner parties, hoping random guests will share their joy and help with expenses. Some have even created virtual restaurants, comparable to the speakeasies that served illegal liquor during the U.S. prohibition era. In Argentina, these "puertas cerradas," or "closed-door" restaurants, proliferated after the economy crashed in 2002, operating on a cash basis, without formal advertising or oversight.



In this April 12, 2014, photo, Chef Ezequiel De La Torre, center, talks to customers as Franco, right, heads to his bedroom in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The website [www.cookapp.com](http://www.cookapp.com) was launched in March 2013, and recently moved its headquarters from Buenos Aires to New York City. It works like a matchmaker, arranging intimate gourmet dinners between strangers. Chefs list when and where they will prepare particular meals; diners book what interests

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More than 50,000 users and 650 cooks registered with Cookapp during its yearlong tryout in Argentina's capital, and just six weeks after its New York City launch, 250 cooks and thousands of customers have signed up there. Next up, the company hopes to expand to San Francisco, followed by Boston and a host of other major U.S. cities.

"I hosted my own dinner club for years and while I absolutely loved it, the seamless logistics behind Cookapp are a dream. I don't have to worry about anything and no money is exchanged the day of the event," said Amber Shreiner, a vegetarian cook advertising a five-course tasting menu with "craft cocktails and endless glasses of wine" at her Manhattan apartment.

EatWith, a startup in Tel Aviv, Israel, and Feastly, which is based in Washington, D.C., offer similar models, though only some of their cooks get "verified" icons to indicate they meet the companies' quality and safety standards. Bologna, Italy-based HomeFood focuses on tourists in Italy, while UK-based Eat With a Local promotes food festivals and other events, as well as home-cooked meals.



In this April 12, 2014, photo, Chefs Martin Arrojo, left, and Ezequiel De La Torre prepare a meal for customers at their home in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Saturday, April 12, 2014. The website [www.cookapp.com](http://www.cookapp.com) was launched in March 2013 and recently moved its headquarters from Buenos Aires to New York City. It works like a matchmaker, arranging intimate gourmet dinners between strangers. Chefs list when and where they will prepare particular meals; diners book what interests them, pay upfront via the app, then just show up and enjoy. (AP Photo/Natacha Pisarenko)

But whether and how to regulate these gatherings that exist on the periphery of the restaurant world is a challenge wherever they pop up.

In New York City, the health department says home-based restaurants are illegal statewide and officials say they could shut down or fine cooks who turn the occasional dinner into a regular income stream. "These establishments don't have a permit from the Health Department, nor are they inspected by city health inspectors," a health department spokesman said via email.



Cookapp describes itself as a marketing service that simply matches chefs with customers who make "donations." Its founders say they are eager to work with governments to create safe and legal spaces for these dinner parties to thrive. Meanwhile, they say they follow the law and pay taxes on their profits while urging hosts to do so as well.

"It really is a murky line," acknowledged Cookapp's CEO and co-founder, Pedro Rivas. "What we do is allow chefs to host dinner parties. People are paying a donation to cover part of the cost of hosting a dinner party. That way we can operate here a little safer without running into the legal mumbo jumbo, particularly in New York, which is a litigious city."



In this April 12, 2014, photo, Chefs Martin Arrojo, left, and Ezequiel De La Torre, second left, Brenda Arrojo, right, prepare salad for customers, as Brenda's son Franco, second right, looks at them while drinking water at their home in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The website [www.cookapp.com](http://www.cookapp.com) was launched in March 2013 and recently moved its headquarters from Buenos Aires to New York City. It works like a matchmaker, arranging intimate gourmet dinners

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How involved companies are in vetting hosts can vary. Cookapp "offers a more curated experience," Rivas says, by evaluating every would-be host beforehand. The company sends a freelance photographer to a dinner party to take pictures and judge the cook's hosting ability, food quality and the setting's comfort and cleanliness. Like the others, Cookapp also has insurance that covers chefs to some extent in case a meal goes terribly wrong.

Participating cooks say they shouldn't be regulated like restaurants, which have to get certificates, permits and licenses from multiple city and state agencies. New York food providers also must post letter grades from annual sanitary inspections.

But as millions of dollars move into this "shared economy," regulatory oversight is inevitable. Airbnb agreed last month to start charging hotel taxes on San Francisco customers, and wants to do the same in New York, where opponents of the service say it fosters illegal nuisance rentals. And shared-ride services recently agreed to limit their drivers and require insurance in Portland, Oregon. "Of course there is a very grey area, and we want to make it as white as we can," Bermudez said.

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