

Mystery Menus

From supper clubs in condos to one-off dinners at secret locations, Toronto's pop-up dinners are popping off.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HECTOR VASQUEZ



WE'VE NEVER BEEN any good at keeping a secret. When it comes to a fantastic meal or a special dinner that knocks our socks off, all we want to do is shout it from the rooftops. So when we caught wind of Toronto's recent slew of under-the-radar supper clubs, we knew we had to see it for ourselves —

and report back to our food-curious readers, naturally.

Torontonians are eager to go beyond the typical dining experience, and the city's chefs and culinary innovators have answered with a series of pop-up dinners and intimate affairs that immerse guests in a one-of-a-kind evening. From multi-course menus enjoyed inside a vintage clothing store to an elaborate seafood supper executed

inside a tiny condo kitchen, we road-test four unique dining experiences that you won't find on OpenTable.

It might not be a reservation at your local neighbourhood spot, but what you lose in familiarity, you'll gain in the sense of community that these word-of-mouth, family-style dinners offer. Bring your appetite, your sense of adventure and some conversation starters, and join us for the ride.



Mystery Eats

HOSTED BY
Shilpa Kotamarthi and Samihan Rai

PRICE
\$90–120 per person

WHERE
Various locations

I DON'T LIKE surprises. I like knowing what I'm doing and where I'm going. But this summer, I was invited to spend an evening indulging in the very thing I can't stand: the unknown. When I locate the College Street address, sent to me 24 hours ago, I'm greeted with an unexpected hug. Shilpa Kotamarthi, co-founder of Mystery Eats, embraces me so lovingly that I almost make it weird and cry. "Welcome," she smiles as she pulls out an empty chair. I take a seat and soak in my surroundings for the first time. The tablescape is something out of a Pinterest dream: A straight line of flickering candles cast their golden light on banana leaf placemats sprinkled with dots of fresh-cut yellow and orange marigolds. There are twelve rippled banana leaves, one for each guest attending tonight's mystery dinner. Determined to highlight some of Toronto's hidden gems, Kotamarthi and fellow co-founder Samihan Rai make and host each themed Mystery Eats dinner at a different venue in the city. Tonight is deeply personal. We're at Madras Kaapi, Kotamarthi's South Indian coffee shop, and the dinner theme pays homage to the scents and flavours of South India that the two founders grew up with. Rai and Kotamarthi will be cooking family recipes for us and preparing the drinks. We start with a neer mor, a powerful liquid blend of coconut yogurt, cucumber, salt, black garlic and lemon. It's unapologetically in-your-face and zesty. I nearly chug it, but force myself to slow down — something this bright and delicious deserves to be savoured. The rest of the evening is a blur of fragrant rice, lentils,



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: South Indian thali served on a banana leaf; Idli podi topped with "gunpowder" spice; Shilpa Kotamarthi and Samihan Rai co-host Mystery Eats, a themed dinner series



chilis and "gunpowder" spice — "you'll see why tomorrow morning," Kotamarthi giggles mischievously. As the night gets longer, the room gets louder with roars of laughter and big conversations leading up to our thali finale served on a silver platter. I scoop my crispy papadam into earthy beetroot poriyal,

tangy yet slightly sweet sambar rice, and a prawn moilee curry that tastes like it's been simmering for hours. A glistening elaichi (cardamom) brûlée caps off the feast, and I'm so full it hurts. Maybe a little mystery is exactly what I needed. mysteryeats.com — BY MEREDITH HARDIE



k.Dinners

HOSTED BY
Ken and Ashley Yau

PRICE
\$150 per person

WHERE
150 Gainsborough Road



ON A SUNDAY evening in July, I uncharacteristically change out of my jammies and into clothes, inputting an address I've never heard of into Uber. It's certainly not the last time I'll be taken out of my comfort zone tonight. The driver drops me off at the bottom of an alleyway next to a No Frills in the East Gerrard area, where I spy a sign for Goji Studio, a charming converted garage filled with handcrafted ceramics and eight complete strangers. But I'm not here to make pottery — I'm one of several lucky diners here for k.Dinners, a playful and evolving supper club hosted by chef Ken Yau and his partner Ashley. The pair put on small-scale blind tastings semi-regularly, so it's quite the coup to be sitting around this farmhouse table with a gaggle of bonafide foodies who joined a waitlist months ago. With precision and elegance, 11 conceptual bites, bowls and dishes make their way in front of us, each more creative than the last. The group sniffs, slurps and gazes up at the skylit ceiling as we silently devour in unison, eyes rheumy from the sensory explosions.

Ken walks us through the inspiration behind each dish, with an audiobook narrator's soothing tones: an oyster that tastes like yuzu, a congee created for his mother's 60th birthday and a purée made of puffed pastry. Ashley takes our non-alcoholic drink orders (k.Dinners is a zero proof event), sprinkling a handful of anecdotes as she goes. When we savour a rich and umami soup delivered in a wobbly bowl that intentionally won't balance on the table, Ashley chuckles as she does her best Ken impression: "I just want to make everything inconvenient for people." Perhaps the most unusual part of this evening-of-the-unexpected is at the end of our meal when a roomful of polite Canadians are asked to refrain from tipping. If we really want to leave a gratuity, it is requested that we purchase a one-of-a-kind ceramic souvenir that speaks to us. My beautiful mug now has pride of place in my kitchen, but I certainly won't be glazing over the memory of this sumptuous evening anytime soon. bychefkenyau.com
— BY KATIE BRIDGES



LEFT: Ken and Ashley Yau put on playful supper clubs out of Goji Studio; Congee with pork jowl and crab; BELOW: A char siu scallop starter

BELOW: Chef Michael Kim (Milou) cooks a Hawaiian feast for this installment of Jeudr3di



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Jeudr3di

HOSTED BY
Alexandra Francis
and Brutalé

PRICE
\$150-300 per person

WHERE
Various locations

PULLING UP TO an industrial-looking stretch of Dundas West, I think I must have the location wrong, but then I see it. An old vintage clothing store has its garage door front entrance open and furniture is spilling out into the parking lot. Sheets draped on clothing lines act like curtains, concealing the seating area from passersby. Everyone milling about looks incredibly cool, all dressed in their own style. Inside the shop, but open to the air, a long farm table is adorned with flowers and the most interesting wine glasses I've ever seen; each one is unique, with a precariously undulating stem. I hardly have time to take it all in before I'm handed a gin martini with Thai chili, elderflower and peach — perfectly crafted by Tommy Conrad (Casa Paco), our bartender for the evening — and swept up into a lively conversation with strangers. Soon, host Alexandra Francis calls us to the table to cheers with the inaugural shot that kicks off every Jeudr3di dinner (named after the French portmanteau for a Thursday night blurring into a Friday morning). During the pandemic, when small gatherings, home-cooked meals and celebrating the simple things became more precious than ever, Francis and Brutalé her partner from a past design project, began hosting family-style dinners with friends behind an abandoned warehouse. Now the dinner series has grown to include friends

and strangers alike who are passionate and curious about food and art. The supper club is still an intimate affair, but the experience is more curated and each dinner is catered by different professional chefs. This meal is being whipped up by SeeYouSoon, the hospitality trio of Kevin Le, Keith Siu and Michael Ovejas, who have restaurants like Noma, Henry's, Frilu and Mimi Chinese on their resumes. Their years of experience in culinary excellence shines in the three-course, family-style dinner. Refreshing and spicy all at once, the smashed cucumber salad is reminiscent of Mimi Chinese, but different. Hokkaido scallop crudo comes swimming in a coconut vinaigrette that I would slurp up if I wasn't worried about first impressions, but luckily when the mussels arrive in scallion sauce they're served with sourdough perfect for sopping everything up. I didn't know poultry could taste so good, until trying their roasted chicken, soaked in jus and incredibly tender. Each course is expertly paired with a wine I've never seen before, but my favourite drink of the night is a sweet bourbon and pear creation made by Conrad, served just as the dessert bar opens. Full of delicious food and drink and laughter, high on conversations with newfound friends about love and life, I float out into the summer evening, already dreaming about my return to Jeudr3di. @jeudr3di
— BY TAYLOR NEWLANDS



Oui Aïa

HOSTED BY

Ayah Hanafieh

PRICE

\$100 per person

WHERE

Downtown

(location disclosed after tickets have been purchased)

SUNGLASSES ON, I slink into the condo's lobby, hoping to make it to the elevator without being observed. I'm not sure why I'm feeling furtive, but there's something about a supper club with a unit number in the address that really adds to the mystique. When I reach my destination, I knock twice and walk straight into the chef's pass, a.k.a. chef Ayah Hanafieh's diminutive condo kitchen, where she's busy prepping for an epic meal. Hanafieh's Middle Eastern background means that for her, food has always represented a coming together — and nothing says community quite like inviting 12 members of the public into your condo once a month for dinner. I arrive and most of the guests are already seated at a long table running the length of the living room. Strangers greet me, ask my name and pass a bag of lighter-than-air leek and garlic focaccia down the table. The sense of camaraderie makes it feel as though I've been invited to an acquaintance's Thanksgiving dinner at their apartment — an acquaintance with culinary training and a starched chef jacket, that is. The table is made up of several groups of friends plus some solo diners like myself, but there are very few awkward silences. Between our game of bingo, in which we're asked to guess the ingredients we're tasting, and conversation starter cards, there are plenty of giggles between courses. At regular intervals, Ayah (the Aïa in Oui Aïa) appears through a gap in the curtains, drawn to give the kitchen some privacy, to provide context on her lick-the-plate-clean dishes. She makes broiled oysters and a family-style lemon and sage ravioli that is so delicious,

our table of otherwise polite diners almost come to blows over the last few bites. Her beer-battered cod is a reworking of a dish Hanafieh's grandmother makes. "In Jordan, we eat fish that's fried. We marinate it in cumin, lemon and garlic, with a tahini sauce on the side with parsley ... This is an ode to my Tata." We might not be in Jordan, but as I watch the sun set over candyfloss clouds from the 19th floor window and enjoy the last bite of my lemon dessert with perfect strangers, it feels like a vacation from reality in the best way possible. ouiia.com

— BY KATIE BRIDGES 



CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: Ayah Hanafieh hosts supper clubs from her Downtown condo; Dishes like broiled oysters; and a vegetable medley are prepared in her tiny kitchen

