
Bon appétit! Start-ups aim at restaurants

By Scott Kirsner

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Cambridge-based Locu said last week that it had collected more than \$600,000 from angel investors, making it the latest restaurant-related start-up in town to raise money. Who else in Boston is trying to improve the experience of eating out? Here's my list:

■ **TotalTab.** View your bill at a bar or restaurant and pay using your mobile phone. It's self-funded so far. Founder Nick Reuter says the company will look to raise money early next year, when it has a beta version operating in a local restaurant.

■ **Tasted Menu.** Founded in 2009 by a Harvard Business School graduate, the company is still in stealth mode but seems to want to tap your social network to recommend specific dishes at restaurants. It has raised an unspecified amount of angel funding.

Coyly, founder Alex Rosenfeld said, "We're a new entrant in the restaurant social recommendation space. We'll be complementary to some existing players, competitive with others, but most importantly, I think we're bringing something proprietary, unique, and (most importantly) useful to the table, no pun intended."

■ **Locu (formerly Goodplates).** When I first wrote about Goodplates, in May, the MIT-spawned start-up was hoping to persuade diners to use mobile phones to photograph food at restaurants and upload ratings and reviews to a website. But as founder Rene Reinsberg began to demonstrate the service and seek investors, he saw how crowded the resto-tech space was.

During the summer, Goodplates changed its name - it is now known as Locu (pronounced "low-koo") - and began focusing on using humans and intelligent software to digitize and categorize information from menus. They plan to help restaurants share menus with lots of websites and mobile apps and create an API to give developers access to the info.

Pricing is not yet set, but they hope to generate revenue from both parties. It raised \$600,000 this month from a group of angel investors.

■ **Leaf.** The Cambridge company is trying to render extinct that faux-leather bill presenter that's dropped at your table at the end of the meal. What if your waiter handed you a small tablet computer that allowed you to review what you had eaten, split the check, figure out the tip, rate each individual dish and beverage, and swipe your credit card?

■ **Textaurant.** Brookline start-up that enables restaurants to manage their waitlists with a PC, and buzz diners when they are ready via their mobile phones (instead of those expensive coaster-shaped pagers.) In use at Fire & Ice in Boston, Finale in Cambridge, and Jerry Remy's at Fenway (on game days).

■ **Objective Logistics.** It aims to motivate servers - and increase restaurant revenues - by ranking performance on a leaderboard. In use at several local Not Your Average Joe's locations.

■ **Crave Labs.** It is helping restaurants expand their customer base using social media and mobile devices.

GoodEatsFor.Me. Similar to Crave Labs, it helps restaurants use social media to see what diners are saying and to distribute special offers.

■ **Survey on the Spot.** The Newton company assists restaurants with designing surveys done on smartphones and tablet computers.

The fall calendar

Now that Labor Day is behind us, the calendar is once again peppered with conferences, networking shindigs, and start-up demo events. Here are a few of the best:

Sept. 12-16: FutureM Week. Panels and conferences on the future of marketing, organized by the trade group MITX.

Sept. 13: Web Innovators Group. Three fledgling companies present to a large audience at the Royal Sonesta in Cambridge, and six others have demo tables that offer an early look at their products.

Oct. 12-28: Boston Region Entrepreneurship Weeks. Events for entrepreneurs.

Oct. 18-19: Emerging Technologies Conference at MIT. Speakers include author Steven Johnson ("Where Good Ideas Come From"), venture capitalist Bill Joy, inventor Dean Kamen, and Joi Ito, the head of MIT's Media Lab.

Oct. 28: Mass TLC Innovation Unconference. Brings together investors, entrepreneurs, and tech execs in an "unconference" format. What does that mean? Participants create the agenda on the morning of the event, with 10 or more sessions occurring simultaneously. It is light on PowerPoint. Short sit-downs allow entrepreneurs to ask questions of volunteer "experts."

Oct. 24: MassChallenge Awards Ceremony. Hear pitches from start-ups participating in the second annual competition, and see who goes home with \$50,000 and \$100,000 prizes. (The total pot is \$1 million.)

Oct. 20: IDEAS Boston. A diverse group of speakers deliver short talks on technology, culture, science, and law, including Harvard's Lawrence Lessig, WiTricity's Eric Giler, and MFA curator Elliot Davis.

(Note: I am an adviser to this event.)

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