

# AT YOUR SERVICE: THE FADING ART OF TRUE HOSPITALITY

GOOD SERVICE TRULY IS AN ART, AND THESE DAYS AS RESTAURANTS DITCH THE WHITE TABLECLOTHS FOR A MORE CASUAL FEEL, IT CAN BE A DYING ONE.

BY AMELIA LEVIN

“You’re not gonna get it baaaa...ck.”

The line in food writer Michael Ruhlman’s *The Making of a Chef*, spoken by a front-of-the-house instructor at the Culinary Institute of America, perhaps says it all. The instructor was referring to that pet peeve-inducing thing lesser-trained servers or bussers do when they leave dirty forks and knives on the table while clearing the first course instead of bringing new ones or worse, *ask* you to take your dirty fork off the plate as they clear it. Heaven forbid you request fresh silverware, and well, you know what can happen.

Good service — the essence of hospitality — truly is an art, and these days as restaurants ditch the white tablecloths for a more casual feel, it can be a dying one. Fact is, many diners don’t even realize that a dirty fork in between courses is a failed step in quality service. They’ve actually been “trained” to accept bad service over the years.

“In my teaching, I do everything I can to teach students what hospitality is and how to apply it in the dining room,” says Alex Cutler, a front-of-the-house instructor at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. “Even though restaurants are going more casual, we can still exceed expectations by not skimping on those traditional elements of fine-dining service and focusing on those sincere, innate characteristics of hospitality that make your guests feel comfortable and special.” What’s old is new again and when it comes to service, the restaurants that take it seriously are the ones that survive and succeed.

Research proves this assertion. According to The American Customer Satisfaction Index’s 2018 Restaurant Report, a majority of diners in all age groups won’t return to a restaurant if they have a bad experience. Among Baby Boomers, 74 percent say they won’t return after just one experience. 62 percent of Millennials and 54 percent of Gen Zers say the same.

On top of that, a study of same-store sales growth among restaurants by research firm TDn2K shows that the fine-dining segment is actually faring better than the upscale casual segment and even the quick-serve and fast-casual ones “as affluent restaurant consumers continue to respond positively to those brands that provide a more experience-driven dining occasion.”

The NPD Group’s David Portalatin had similar things to say at a recent industry conference, when he pointed out that sales at fine-dining restaurants were actually stable, and not on the

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: The view from the dining room at the Rusty Pelican; the Rusty Pelican’s bar at night.



decline as one might assume. “That’s because diners these days want experiences, not just good food,” he said.

Call it “casual elegance” or “upscale dining” — either way, inherent in the finer dining experience lies the expectation of hospitality. And inherent in hospitality, of course, lies good service.

Case in point: when the Rusty Pelican in Miami completely revamped its design and menu a few years ago, though the white tablecloths were taken away, the elements of good service were not.

“People have this notion about fine dining that it’s stuffy, but it doesn’t have to be that, and just because your restaurant might have a more casual setting, the service doesn’t have to be sloppy,” says Pallava Goenka, regional manager.

It all comes down to “being with your table” and training servers to get to know their individual diners so they can properly tailor their experience, whether that’s a night out with friends, an intimate date night, a business meeting or other. While more traditional fine-dining restaurants catered more to special occasions these chef-driven, upscale casual restaurants might see diners more frequently and for different reasons. “People might not have three or four hours to spend on dinner anymore, but that doesn’t mean they don’t want a memorable experience.”

Another case in point: when Nina Compton and Larry Miller, proprietors of the fine-dining Compere Lapin in New Orleans, opened their second concept, Bywater American Bistro, this past Spring, they sought a more casual dining environment yet one still rooted in the more traditional elements of high-end service.

“We wanted to give appearance visually of something more comfortable and casual, but with the same attention to detail

in food and service that you would expect from a fine dining restaurant,” Miller says.

Though there are more shareable, small plate and family-style dishes on the menu, Miller makes sure his staff members remember to regularly swap out used plates and silverware for fresh ones just like traditional “marking” in between courses at a fine-dining restaurant. Pouring soup and sauces at the table as a finishing element also brings in that entertainment-driven feeling of a fine-dining restaurant without the stuffiness. And, though the restaurant skipped the more formal shirt and tie look in favor of jeans, t-shirts and denim aprons, you’ll still see servers folding napkins for guests when they take a restroom break and constantly making sure tables are clutter-free and clean.

“We could have gone with bone China and dressed our servers in tuxedos, but then we would only see the guest once a year for special occasions,” says Miller. “There is certainly a place for those storied restaurants, but we think this is a more fun way to dine while enjoying the same level of quality in terms of food and service.”

At the newly opened Etta in Chicago, general manager Adam Scholten focuses on building culture first as the basis of true hospitality.

“Technical things like marking plates, exchanging dirty silverware for clean forks — those can all be taught, but what makes an environment upscale, in my opinion, is the culture,” he says. “We make sure we hire the right people and then enable our staff to allow their personality to shine while always being professional.”

The first step is to encourage the staff to have fun. The second step, Scholten says, is to open up all lines of communication. After the general pre-shift meeting, he encourages servers to have their own, station-specific pre-shift meetings with the back servers and/or bussers they work with to set standards and expectations as far as watering, marking and other elements of service.

Adding more staff or shifting the positions of service can also help put more focus on the guest. Scholten looks to stages for extra hands on busy nights, while Cutler encourages restaurants to consider a more fine-dining-esque front/back server operation.

“There are ways to blend the very traditional captain server, back server, busser and runner scenario to allow the front server to be in the dining room with his or her tables more often while back servers and bussers can take care of the nitty-gritty things like placing the tables, helping clear, filling water glasses and running food,” Cutler says. He notes he’s even seen some servers at restaurants use carbon copy ordering pads so front servers can give a copy of the menu to back servers and bussers without having to take extra time to communicate table needs.

At Rusty Pelican in Miami, Goenka says, adding more back support in the form of additional bussers and runners (all trained on the elements of great service, of course) has helped free up more time for front servers to educate and sell wine.

## THE ELEMENTS OF GREAT SERVICE

Though more restaurants are taking a casual approach to dining, many remain rooted in fine-dining traditions. Alex Cutler, front-of-the-house instructor at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park ('08), and a former trainer for Darden Restaurants' The Capital Grille, takes us through the steps used at The Bocusse Restaurant on campus for a refresher.

### GREETING

"When guests arrive, we make sure to open the door for them and immediately make them feel like kings and queens, which was very traditional in the past," Cutler says. "That initial, warm greeting really sets the tone and the first impression, and it all starts at the front door."

### SEATING

"We teach our hosts to engage the guests, ask if they have dined with us before, and make small talk to make them feel at home," Cutler says. The hosts are also trained to pull out chairs for the guests and wait until they are fully settled and comfortable before offering the menu in their hands, rather than placing it on top of the napkin and leaving.

### ORDERING

Cutler disproves of the "I'll be right with you" line some servers use when they're busy and can't get to the table within 30 seconds. "We encourage our servers to prioritize so they can get to the table and not walk away or pass by the guest in that moment, otherwise they can feel ignored," he says. When

it comes to ordering and serving, Cutler believes in the traditional "ladies first" approach, starting with the eldest lady at the table.

### SERVICE

In between courses, Cutler teaches his students to properly "mark" or "place" (as in "mis en place") the table by clearing away dirty silverware and share plates for fresh pieces.

### FINALE

Last impressions are just as — if not more — important than the first. Cutler trains his students to not clear any plates until the last guest has finished eating and put down his or her fork. The table should then be completely cleared except for water glasses and cleaned before dessert and/or coffee service begins. Before dropping the check, the table should again be completely cleared of any unnecessary glassware and silverware.

Even when the check is paid, Cutler reminds his students, service is not over. Servers should still be watering the table, offering coffee refills and "paying as much attention to the guest as they did when they first arrived," he says.

In addition, offering what Cutler calls "*minure d's*" in the form of small bites from the pastry chef or wrapped chocolates can also be a great way to leave a lasting impression and even give the guest a "branded" item to take home that serves as a reminder to come back.

As part of the concept overhaul when the restaurant expanded its wine program, it started a program offering managers and servers (even some back-of-the-house staff) with six or more months on the job the opportunity to participate in the Court of Master Sommeliers Level 1 program. For the past two years, the restaurant has hosted three programs, during which the group of about 10 to 15 staff members go through eight weeks of intensive training on wine before sitting for the exam. The program is fully paid for by Rusty Pelican, although Goenka has the participants put down half of the cost as an incentive to



complete the program. All the participants have passed and one server even went on to become a trainer for the restaurant and earn his Level 2 certification on his own.

Talk about building culture. "We've definitely seen an uptick in wine sales, but more importantly, the program has been great for boosting morale among our staff and the overall experience for our guests," Goenka says.

Aside from wine lovers, don't forget about the littler diners when employing elements of great service, according to Miller.

"We want to be a restaurant with great food and service but also where you wouldn't think twice about bringing your children in to dine with you," he says. "We have a family who regularly comes to brunch and the three-year-old noticed an ear was missing on our signature rabbit and made a new one to replace it for us," Miller says. "By not treating children like they're some kind of scourge, we're winning repeat visits with the parents."

As the "fine-dining" segment morphs into one that sees diners of all types and ages, restaurants that take the steps to cater to these varying expectations and needs are the ones seeing the most success. Great service is indeed an art, but it doesn't have to be a dying one. ■

TOP: The private dining room at Bywater American Bistro; Bywater's bar.

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