

# CA 115 Table Service Course Book

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# Section 1

## Introduction

### Hospitality

**Specific actions on the server's part can lead to desired feelings and emotions on the guest's part.**

*“I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it is,” Wayne Gretzky.* In relating this to service, how can we anticipate what the guest will need before they know it? Rather than waiting for them to call it to our attention. For instance, if a guest stands up in the middle of their dining experience and turns their head, what do they need and how can we help?

Think of the actions or mechanics of supplying/delivering our products to a guest as **service**, but the resulting feelings and emotions that the guest experiences result in the **hospitality** that we deliver. Consider how many overlapping choices a guest has when they decide to dine out. Consider that many people get most of their meals outside of the home. Any restaurant can duplicate any dish that any other restaurant is offering. The one item that they cannot duplicate is the actual individuals delivering that food giving the guest a truly unique experience. Therefore, service may be the one factor that you can use to differentiate your establishment from the competition. I have heard it said that excellent service can compensate for average food, but great food can't compensate for poor service. This is an age-old argument. What is more important the food or the service? Discussion anyone?

**Action and Mechanics = Service**

**Feelings, Caring, and Emotions = Hospitality**

**Service + Hospitality = Truly Memorable Dining Experiences.**

**Some variables or elements to this equation are:**

- Reservation and seating systems
- Welcoming
- Correct order taken
- Timing of the meal and subsequent courses.
- Unintrusive but constantly available.
- Sanitation and safety – how a plate or cup is held, personal hygiene, allergen protocol.
- Menu knowledge – flavors, origin, allergens, preparation time, complementary flavors/pairings.
- Check presentation – accurate, correct time, correct person.
- Comfort – Dining room temperature, chairs, lighting
- Confidence – Correct answers, timing, ordering
- Respect – Order of service, listening to wants and needs, attentiveness
- Appreciative – Thank the guest at every turn.

One more explanation and thought on this concept: Each item above can be done mechanically or robotically with the removal of hospitality. How we deliver the simple service items in an emotional and feeling way is the combination of the physical service and the emotional hospitality. Later we will attempt to separate the service aspects from the hospitality aspects. But first we need to discuss the overall framework, vision, mission, and culture of the operation that needs to exist amongst the entire team, so they are focused and driven to accomplish these common goals and actions. The most important cultural item in any operation should be safety and sanitation. We will discuss this first before the intricacies of the overarching culture itself.

## **Sanitation and Safety CA 115 Table Service**

### ***You, Your Space and Your Stuff***

*“If you can lean, you can clean”, Ray Kroc*

The following documentation is a work in progress and augments what you have already learned in CA 111 Safety and Sanitation course (AND ARE EXPECTED TO PERFORM EVERY DAY IN THIS CLASS!).

This document is not the end-all in Sanitation and Safety. It is to help the CA 115 Team, understand, follow and apply specific behaviors and procedures to keep us and our guests safe. While these are for our specific operation, this type of a document should be used in all types of food service operations. Either it should be included in the employee handbook, training manuals or a standalone policy document.

The number one way to improve our sanitation is to wash your hands. Many situations where hand washing is obvious you learned from your Sanitation certification (After eating, drinking, bathroom, etc.). In the dining room, there may be less obvious times due to the danger of cross contamination/cross contact – such as:

- Before starting the shift.
- Before setting a table.
- After clearing a table.
- Before running food.
- After touching the POS or OpenTable terminals.
- After touching check presenters or pens/pencils.
- Before using or folding linen.
- After touching linen used by a guest.
- Before and after touching menus.
- After helping guests with coats.
- Before using any coffee equipment.

## **Some Heritage Rules on Sanitation**

### **Personal Responsibilities:**

- Follow Handbook Uniform **KITCHEN** Rules:
  - No False Fingernails and polish
  - No Piercings – **Piercings, jewelry, and hair all harbor staphylococcal bacteria (nasty stuff, the worse is the flesh-eating kind!) which is why such jewelry is illegal in the kitchen. Is your vanity more important than your guests’**

**safety?! And therefore, your livelihood?!? If you are going to be in this industry, it is time to make responsible decisions. If not, I may excuse you from class.**

- No Jewelry
- Hair restraint if below shoulders
- Black non-skid, non-porous, leather-like Shoes
- Personal Hygiene – If I can smell you, you are “out of uniform”.
  - This includes perfume and cologne.
  - Guests come to dine and enjoy the food. Perfume and cologne take away from the food experience.
- You must have several pens
- You must have a serviette
  - For spills
  - To serve hot items
  - To crumb table
  - To guard while pouring beverages at the table
  - To wipe hands (once)
  - Keep in pocket of apron or on arm.
    - Never on shoulder, butt pocket, or tucked into waist.
- You must have an apron
- No smoking during service time between 11:00 AM – 1:50 PM
  - If I can smell it, you are “out of uniform”, and may be sent home.
- No chewing gum.
- Wear a hair net or skull cap if you are in the kitchen preparing butter, bread, cheese, coffee, tea, whipped cream, zest, etc.
- Wash your hands as stated above
- No bare hand food contact
- No eating or drinking anywhere except in the Barclay room. Think of it as our break room.
  - Remember to wash your hands BEFORE and after.
  - **Differentiate between tasting and eating**
- When walking behind someone, say, “Behind”
- If you hear someone say, “Behind”, don’t move!
- Walk like you drive...right side of the “road”, right door, etc.
- If you must go through the wrong door, say, “Wrong door!” Just because you can, does NOT mean you should!

### **Equipment Handling Responsibilities:**

- Never use a glass to scoop ice.
- Handle glasses and utensils by the bottom third or the stem/handle.
- Only touch plates from the bottom or the edge of the rim.
- Check, clean and fill salt and pepper grinders
- Always check plates and silverware for spots, dried food, etc.
- Check coffee cups for stains.
- Check china, glassware and all service ware for chips and cracks.
  - Dispose of damaged items in the specified bucket at the dish machine.
  - NEVER put damaged breakable items in a normal trash can.



- Check any and all equipment for cleanliness and physical wholesomeness
- Sanitize all tables and chair surfaces including bases.
- Polish chrome and mirrors in bathrooms
- Wipe window ledges

## **Loading, Lifting/Holding, and Carrying Trays**

ALWAYS use trays for EVERYTHING!

Why?

- **Looks** – We want to exude a classy, upscale appearance at the Heritage and carrying on a tray is visually appealing as opposed to balancing a bunch of plates up your arm like in a diner.
- **Safety** – With a tray you can carry more items in a safer manner since the items are not crunched together in your hands. If something falls off a plate it lands on the tray, not the floor. Glassware does not get balanced on plates, etc.
- **Sanitation** – Trays make it so that you do not have to have a guest’s food resting on your hand and arm coming from the kitchen. It keeps the person from clearing the table from putting his fingers in several glasses to carry them. It keeps dirty plates and food away from your hands, arms and body. It helps avoid cross contamination or cross contact.
- **Efficiency** – Simply put, you can carry more with a tray and take less trips back and forth to the kitchen and dish room.

### **Specific Points about Tray Service:**

- Large oval trays are for food service and clearing or setting tables. They always get a tray jack!
- Small round trays are for beverage service or single replacement items for the guest (not food), such as utensils, empty B&B plates, or napkins. Never for clearing dirty plates.
- All oval trays should be lined with a napkin – seam side down.

### **Loading Trays:**

1. Center a napkin on the tray seam side down.
2. Heavy items should be positioned in the center of the tray.
3. Stage lighter items around the perimeter.
4. When clearing a dirty table:
  - a. First pile utensils off to a side on the napkin or a dinner plate with a napkin on it to keep the utensils from sliding. (Yes, the napkin will need to be changed once you unload at the dishwashing area.)
  - b. Position one plate to take the “scrapings”
  - c. Scrape onto the above plate and stack similar plates together.
  - d. Position cups, glassware, B&B’s etc. around the perimeter.

### **Lifting/Holding and Carrying Trays:**

- Beverage trays (rounds) may be carried at waist height.
  - a. Note which hand you should have the tray in is dictated by how you are serving the guest.
  - b. If you are serving guests beverages, then the tray must be in the left hand so you can serve the guest with your right hand from the guest’s right side.
  - c. Never use a tray jack with a beverage (round) tray.

- d. While carrying coffee cups and saucers or other items with underliners, stack the underliners separately on the tray from the cups. **NOTE:** An underliner is used as a “saucer” to catch spills, help with delivery of the item (think bowl of soup), and have a rest for a spoon (think coffee saucer or intermezzo doiled B&B). Also, when using an underliner, a doily must always be used EXCEPT for a coffee saucer.
  - i. Do not pour coffee or water before the glass is on the table. Refills are never lifted from the table. The guests should never have to touch or move anything.
  - ii. Once at the table, place the cup on the saucer while still on the tray.
  - iii. Place the cup and saucer on the table together with handle at 4 o’clock.
  - iv. When pouring beverages at the table, never lift the glass or move it. Pour it where it rests on the table. (Unless you can’t physically reach it, then move it into reach first)
  - v. Serve cream, sugar, honey, etc. immediately before or after beverage service, but at the same visit to the table. Do not make a second trip!!!
  - vi. These condiments are served on the right with handles at 4 o’clock.
  - vii. You may have to rearrange items on the table to serve correctly. Take control and move it.
- Food trays (ovals) should be carried at shoulder height.
  - a. Bending at the knees to pick these trays up or set them down is very important.
    - i. We will demonstrate and practice this.
  - b. Always use a tray jack with a food (oval) tray. NEVER use a food tray like a cocktail tray.
  - c. Alignment with the tray jack is very important.
    - i. The long ends of the oval tray must extend past the bars of the tray jack
    - ii. We will demonstrate and practice this.
  - d. You may use your palm or fingertips to balance trays.
  - e. You may use your opposite hand and shoulder to help balance the oval food trays.

## **Moments of Truth**

Other than the government, the food service industry is the largest employer in the country. There are millions of establishments employing tens of millions of workers. You can imagine how many interactions there are between us and our guests every minute of every day. These individual interactions, each contact, with each guest is a “Moment of Truth”

Jan Carlson was the CEO of Scandinavian Airlines in 1981. He turned his company around from losing \$8 million in one year to earning \$71 million in just over one year. He coined the concept of, “Moment of Truth”. His definition of the “Moment of Truth” was anytime a guest comes in contact or has an interaction with any aspect of the company. These “Moments of Truth” have an impact on the guest which is either positive or negative no matter what the perceived size of the interaction might be. These interactions coupled with the guests’ perceived value of the interaction leads to guest satisfaction. The perceived value includes how much an item costs along with all its perceived service and hospitality elements that were delivered by the staff.

What makes a Moment of Truth positive or negative depends on how the staff delivers them. Also remember, everyone has a guest whether it be internal or external. If you don’t personally have direct contact with a guest, you do have contact with someone that does have direct contact

with a guest. It is important to make every Moment of Truth with all people positive. In this way, in the end, the external guest will have a positive Moment of Truth.

How many moments of truth can you list through a normal dining experience in a casual upscale restaurant? One table of four guests could literally have hundreds. If you think of an average size restaurant like San Chez Bistro, where 2000 covers per week (**NOTE**: a **Cover** is the arrangement of plateware, flatware, napkin, and glassware at each place setting. It also refers to the number of guests during any designated time period) is not uncommon, then the moments of truth could number in the millions each year!

### **Managing Moments of Truth**

How do you manage such situations? Early on, an organization and its management team should develop a culture of service for the entire team to help everyone navigate these Moments of Truth. For San Chez Bistro, we developed a mission and vision. Later, after about four years, we realized that we needed to add to the vision and mission with a set of corporate goals based upon the Disney model. We realized that it was not enough to articulate what and where we wanted to be in the future. We needed to define what we wanted our team to be and how they should think along the way – in the present.

One way we helped this along was with a strict Open-Door policy that facilitated continual improvement.

The policy, vision, mission and goals were as follows in our 35-page handbook:

#### **Open Door Policy**

*The "open door" refers to a policy enabling you to get help in solving your problems or have the opportunity to express your concerns.*

*The "open door" encourages effective communication. Your immediate supervisor is in the best position to help you with any problems. However, if you have spoken to your supervisor and are not satisfied with the results, any member of management is available to discuss the situation with you.*

*If you wish to speak to a member of management a good first step is to inform your supervisor. The supervisor then can recommend who would be the best person with whom to talk.*

#### **San Chez Restaurant, Inc. Mission Statement**

*Our goal is to be West Michigan's best restaurant company, for our employees, guests, and the community.*

*For our employees, San Chez Restaurant, Inc. will be a clean, safe, friendly, fun, and environmentally responsible place to work, while fostering teamwork, respect, and pride.*

*San Chez Restaurant, Inc. will provide its guests with world-class food and service,*

*while exceeding their expectations in a uniquely entertaining atmosphere.*

*As part of the community, San Chez Restaurant, Inc. will be a source of local pride and community support through its demonstrated caring, contribution, ethics, and respect.*

### **Corporate Values vs. Corporate Goals**

*It is important to know and maintain at all times our corporate goals on the following page. However, TO INSPIRE AND CREATE BEHAVIOR the following values take precedent. They will guide you in decision making and help you prioritize during situations where you need to think on your feet. For example: An employee injures themselves on the job and needs assistance. At that point corporate goal number one, zero complaints per shift, is not important. Who cares how much a guest is going to complain while you assist your injured team member!!! Goals are for the future, Values are for today! With this in mind consider the following Corporate Values.*

#### **Value #1 Safety and Sanitation**

*We must have a safe, clean, and sanitary environment at all times for guests and employees alike.*

#### **Value #2 Entertainment and Fun**

*Satisfied guests are not enough. Promote activities and behavior that enables employees and guests to have fun and be entertained.*

#### **Value #3 World Class Food and Service**

*What is more important great food or great service? These two should always go hand-in-hand. Together they are the core of our business.*

#### **Value #4 Efficiency = Fiscal Responsibility**

*Every day as we complete our jobs we have an opportunity to affect the financial status of our jobs and the corporation. We need to value the large amounts of time and money it takes to complete our jobs. Use them wisely and efficiently. Always look for a better way.*

### **San Chez Restaurant Inc. Culture**

*We build a particular culture at San Chez Restaurants, Inc. that dictates to everyone how to act, how to look and how to communicate with each other and guests. The following is a summary of our corporate culture.*

1. *The first part of everyone's job description: Be Clean, Be Friendly & Have Fun.*
2. *San Chez Restaurant Inc. Mission Statement is our VISION for guests and employees and community*
  - *Our goal is to be West Michigan's best restaurant company, for our employees, guests, and the community.*
  - *For our employees, San Chez Restaurant Inc. will be a clean, safe, friendly, fun, and environmentally responsible place to work, while fostering teamwork, respect, and pride.*
  - *San Chez Restaurant Inc. will provide its guests with world-class food and service, while exceeding their expectations in a uniquely entertaining atmosphere.*

- *As part of the community, San Chez Restaurant Inc. will be a source of local pride and community support through its demonstrated caring, contribution, ethics, and respect.*
3. *We take our jobs seriously! 100%. 100% of the time! But we don't take ourselves seriously.*
  4. *Don't ever give guests a LIVER day. Give them an ice cream sundae day or a pizza day, both with all your favorite toppings!*
  5. *We recognize performance based upon (and in this order of priority)*
    - *Guest satisfaction (internal and external)*
    - *Performance*
    - *Behavior, attitude*
    - *Longevity*
  6. *Emulate actions, ideals, and attitudes. Copy, maintain, and share them! The management team will strive to be your role models, mentors, and leaders in these areas. As we hold each other to this (we, as a team), you must also hold our management team to this!*
  7. *To be a part of San Chez Restaurant Inc. You must:*
    - *Adhere to our Structure (the manuals, policies and procedures) = positive results*
    - *Adhere to our Culture = appropriate behavior and attitude*
    - *Have Actual Involvement with our company and team = combination of both!*
  8. *Our Formula:*
    - *A quality staff experience + (influences) a quality guest experience + (influences) quality business practices = Our Vision Statement*
    - *You have to feel good with your San Chez Bistro uniform on! Passion! You have to need it! You have to get it! You have to want it! To be a part of this team.*
  9. *It all begins and ends with this:*
    - *San Chez Restaurant Inc. Mission Statement is our VISION for guests and employees & community*
    - *Our goal is to be West Michigan's best restaurant company, for our employees, guests, and the community.*
    - *For our employees, San Chez Restaurant Inc. will be a clean, safe, friendly, fun, and environmentally responsible place to work, while fostering teamwork, respect, and pride.*
    - *San Chez Restaurant Inc. will provide its guests with world-class food and service, while exceeding their expectations in a uniquely entertaining atmosphere.*
    - *As part of the community, San Chez Restaurant Inc. will be a source of local pride and community support through its demonstrated caring, contribution, ethics, and respect.*

The above was so important to me, that each year we would hold a culture meeting to reinforce the above corporate climate. This three-hour meeting was mandatory for all employees and went into details regarding each ideal, phrase, and goal. At the end, I would earnestly ask any employees that did not believe in this, or that did not want to live up to it, to leave. I would literally say something along the lines of, "I spend the majority of my life in this space with you all, and I want to enjoy it, have fun with it and have pride in everything we do. If you cannot agree with these ideals, then there may be a better fit for you at some other establishment or industry. Please do not allow us to waste your time and life with us

and please do not waste ours. You may thrive in a different type of environment and there may be a person out there that would thrive in this environment in your place.”

Each year we would lose a few employees after they would seriously consider these words. I remember losing nearly ten the first year alone. But as time went on, there were less and less until finally our turnover became less than 25% per year – this in an industry where 110% can be the norm. The last time I spoke with Cindy Schneider, President, San Chez Restaurants, Inc, turnover was less than 15%.

### **The Costs of Mismanagement**

Once these moments of truth are managed and enhanced, the end result is repeat business. Some estimates equate each individual guest as worth over \$5,000 over a ten-year span. On the other hand, mismanagement can cause a loss of business. In the past, studies have shown that every guest that has a bad experience tells 8-10 people about the experience and 1 out of 5 of these guests tell 20 people. Today with social media “telling one person” could equate to a posting on a website that could easily reach tens of thousands of people in a matter of minutes – maybe even with picture and video evidence! And it can cost five times more to create a new regular guest than to retain a current one. Quite simply put, we cannot afford to let any Moment of Truth escape us in the hospitality industry.

Some research has shown that out of 100 dissatisfied guests:

- 40 will never ask for help and relay their dissatisfaction to others as stated above.
- Of the 60 that will ask for help, only 70% will return as guests.
- Of the 60 that asked for help, 18 are never helped – they relay their dissatisfaction as stated above.
- Of the 42 remaining guests that ask for help, 95% will return as guests if their problems are resolved immediately and will tell 5 people how your establishment helped them.
- Of the 42 guests that asked for help, 13 remain dissatisfied – they relay their dissatisfaction as stated above.

The bottom line is the bottom line. You want to make a living and turn a profit. 80% of your business comes from 20% of your customer base. This is referred to as the 80/20 rule. Given the above statistics about dissatisfied guests, you will never know about 40% of the failed Moments of Truth and of the 60% that may come forward and complain, only 95% of these will be satisfied in the end. That leaves a lot of negative word of mouth. As you can see, it is better for your pocketbook to proactively manage every Moment of Truth by putting systems in place that benefit these interactions to ensure they are executed correctly in the first place, rather than relying on feedback from customers to help you fix issues after they occur.

**And remember, who are our customers?**

### **The Manager and How to Manage**

Next, who is responsible for great (or bad) service?

As you can see above, the management and ownership will set the culture for guest service by developing standardized processes, procedures, protocols, and policies that revolve around supporting the service culture, quality, and excellence. But service is not restricted to a top down

management function. As you can see above in the San Chez Culture list, it is everyone's responsibility to hold each other, even managers, to the expectations. Can you imagine yourself going up to your manager and saying, "You aren't doing your job well today, can I assist you to get you back on track?" That is exactly what I expect a high functioning team to be able to do. For example:

Everyone has a bad day outside of work. Sometimes things happen and you bring that negativity in with you and begin effecting others and the operation. As a business owner, I very often went into work with a frown and scowl on my face – it could be personal, or it could be a myriad of issues that an owner faces every day. I can't tell you how many times a dishwasher, salesperson (server), sales support (food runner) or host would come up to me and say, "Dan, what's wrong? You are giving us a 'liver' day. Can we help?" Well that alone would be enough to snap me out of it and get back into the culture that we demand. Can you imagine the strength of the culture that enables those positions to say that to an owner of an operation? Powerful stuff indeed!

So, yes, management must emulate exactly what they expect so the culture lives beyond them. Good managers embody other traits to support the culture, some are:

- "Being everywhere all the time." This can be referred to by being ubiquitous or MBWA – Management By Walking Around.
- Being very stringent and unforgiving when it comes to Quality Standards (Which should be physically documented, referred to, and measured through evaluation and annual reviews for all employees) but,
- Being flexible and nurturing when it comes to the people responsible for upholding those standards.
- Possessing an almost obsessive, compulsive relationship to details.
- Able to take risks and try new things to support the quality standards.

Everyone has a customer, whether internal or external, therefore everyone in the organization is responsible for every Moment of Truth. Treat your teammates as guests and customers!

### **Seven Principles of Extraordinary Hospitality**

1. First Impressions - before the greeting! Social media/reviews, parking lot, windows, sidewalk, Reservation system, phone calls, bathroom.
2. The Greeting: Courteous, Friendly. and Welcoming – The 51%er
3. Knowledgeable Servers using Effective Communication – menu, history, origins, guests' names, preferences, special dates, area events/times, hours, etc.
4. Efficient and Well-Timed – Pivot-turn, full hands in and out, consolidate, anticipate guests' needs
5. Flexible – Deliver personalized service to every guest and be prepared for a constantly changing environment.
6. Consistent and Trustworthy – Outcome, accurate information, sanitation and safety, food and service
7. Exceeds Expectations: 100%, 100% of the time!

## **The Nine Guidelines of Service**

1. Welcome the Guests – More than a greeting! Some establishments have a 2-minute, 1-minute or 30-second time limit for greeting the guest. I feel these quantitative times are all too long. The greeting must happen instantaneously and immediately. It could even be as simple as a nod and smile in their direction, while making eye contact, even if you are engaged at another table. **Use the guest's name whenever possible.** Make it personal.
2. Women are served before men. (Children before women.) Men after women. Always serve the eldest women first, then the remaining women. Then serve the eldest men first, then the remaining men.
3. Beverages and soups (hot liquids) are served from the guest's right side with the server's right hand. The server moves clockwise around the table. This could include items such as Pho, Ramen, Zarzuela, Cioppino, Bouillabaisse, etc. (WHAT? You don't know what these dishes are? Look them up! You are a culinary student!)
4. All guest's food must be brought to the table at the same time.
5. Food is served from the guest's left side with the server's left hand. The server moves counter-clockwise around the table.
6. Don't remove guests' plates from the table until all guests are finished eating. (Although in the interest of time or if the guest breaks service etiquette, we may clear as each guest finishes)
7. Dirty dishes are cleared from the guest's right side with the server's right hand. The server moves clockwise around the table.
8. Never stack or scrape dirty plates on the guests' table or directly in front of them. Keep the tray and tray jack 2-3 feet from the tables.
9. Thank the guest – at every turn that we are able – from everyone we can. The guest cannot hear this enough.

But what if we tried to do all of the above and it still doesn't quite work out the way the guest or we expected? Then we have damage control...

## **Complaints and Other Special Situations**

### **We Take the Blame (Benjamin)**

"The customer is always right. Until they're wrong."

And even then, I take responsibility.

I've been blamed for the traffic. I've been blamed for the rain. I've been blamed for being on the wrong side of Broad Street. "How could you be all the way over here? This is ridiculous!" I've been blamed for sloping sidewalks, cracks in the sidewalk and flat tires. I've been blamed for late babysitters and rude parking lot attendants. I've been blamed for stomachaches (which turned out to be the flu). All of these woes are beyond my control, and I caused none of them. But for you, I will take the blame. I want you to be happy.

I can't fix the cracked sidewalk, but I can make you forget about your stubbed toe. I can't stop the rain, but you're in my shelter now, so sit for as long as you want with your dry martini. I can't thin out the traffic, but now that you're parked at our table, stick around for a while. We'll have an after-dinner drink. Let the traffic clear over a bowl of gelato. You'll be happy when you leave, if you let me try.



The customer may not always be right, but they're always the customer. If, I can help them find a little bit of salvation at the end of a long day, even if it means swallowing a bit of pride in order to commiserate, then bring it on.

One miserably rainy night, a doctor arrived almost an hour late for his seven o'clock reservation. The rest of his party was close behind. It wasn't going to be a problem for us, until it was. "Oh, I'm sorry," our host said when he announced himself "I don't see your name here ...". He responded with ill humor, "I'm soaking wet. It's pouring rain. So I'm a little late. How did you think I was going to show up on time?"

Taken aback, the host tried to defuse the situation. "No, I was just saying I did not see your name at first, but I see it now in our seven o'clock slot. It's really not a problem, and I do apologize." "You know, I had to wait forever in the rain in the parking lot for the attendant. How rude! Who do I talk to about that?" "Sir, I'm sorry, but we do not own the parking lot and we don't have a business relationship with them. I'm happy to get you the company's phone number if you'd like." "Fine," he said curtly, and then walked into the dining room, dripping wet. From the nearest empty table –which had just been set for the next party, which was not his – he grabbed some napkins and proceeded to dry himself off in the middle of the near-full dining room, where Marc and I had been standing. We wouldn't have believed it unless we'd seen it with our own eyes, but this gentleman proceeded to wipe himself down with our fancy linen. I ran over to him and said, "Sir, I have towels in the back. Please come with me and I'll bring some for you."

He continued to grab more linens, and said, "Oh, these will do just fine. But now I have to sit soaking wet. Do you have anything for me?" I couldn't imagine what he was asking me for. A new outfit? A clothes dryer? I half-heartedly said, "Sir, I don't have anything to dry your clothes with, besides some towels." He brushed off my offer, finished with the napkins, and said, "Oh, great. Fine. I guess I'll dry at some point, but your seats are going to get wet." I was fine with that.

The man accepted my invitation to take a seat at his table while waiting for his party, but before his butt hit the seat, he said, "Don't you have anything for me to drink?" "Of course, we'll bring you something to drink. What would you like?" "What do you have?" "Everything that a normal bar has." "Bring me a Johnny Walker Black on the rocks." "Okay. What kind of water would you like?" "What? Oh, I don't care. Plain water."

We brought him his predinner cocktail, and soon enough the rest of his party appeared, thankfully a bit drier and more polite. They caught up with a drink, then placed their orders. We started to bring out the food. Throughout the meal, it was clear that there was nothing this gentleman liked, and worse, nothing we could do to make him happy. When the servers brought his third course, he looked up and sharply said "What is this?" as if they hadn't explained each of the previous courses as they were served.

All through the night, several of our staff dealt with this man, and handled him with grace and optimism, but were met at each turn with growls, grimaces and general disdain.

By dessert – which makes most people really happy – he had actually warmed up a little. His clothes were dry, the parking lot incident was a distant memory and whatever business he was doing with the people at his table seemed to have been successful. After he paid the check, he stood up, looked at us, smiled thinly and said, "Everything was wonderful, thanks."

We were happy to have the thanks. We were happy everything was wonderful. How about an apology? That was not going to happen. Sometimes we just have to suck it up in the service industry; that's what service professionals do.

I didn't grow up in the restaurant business; I grew up in the religion business. As the son of a rabbi, I was taught to take a different perspective on life's challenges. When my friends' parents were meting out corporal punishment at home, my transgressions were met with the teachings of Aristotle, Plato and Descartes – words of wisdom to provide direction around life's little roadblocks.

One story has remained an inspiration over the years, and I've retold it during our pre-service meetings to remind staff of one of their most important responsibilities.

It's the story of the trouble tree. A once-grand old temple was starting to show wear and tear around the facade, so a few handymen were hired to paint walls and repair broken windows. After a particularly grueling day, the rabbi noticed the last worker packing up to leave. He also noticed that the only car in the lot was his own, and assumed the man was walking home. He approached this weary man and offered him a ride.

"But Rabbi," the man replied. "You don't know where I live. What if it's out of your way?" "Well, the car does all the work; all I have to do is steer! I'm getting ready to leave for the day, too. We'll enjoy the ride together." The man accepted the rabbi's offer and off they went. They talked about the work being done on the temple, the challenges the laborer had faced that day and how much longer the job might take. They pulled up to the man's house, and as the rabbi said goodbye, the man said, "You know, there's always extra food at our dinner table. Why don't you join us? I'd love for you to meet my family, and I would like to repay you for taking me home and saving me the long walk."

The rabbi accepted. At the doorway, the man stopped and bent over a sickly little tree full of branches but devoid of leaves. He rubbed his hands on several of the branches, stood up and continued to the door, his smile growing. After a quick glance back at his guest, he threw open the door and yelled, "Daddy's home!" Three kids ran up and jumped into his arms. His wife walked over, kissed him on the cheek and asked, "So how was your day?"

"Just great. We got a lot of work done, and we are all set for tomorrow's project. By the way, I've invited a dinner guest – the rabbi of the temple I'm working on. I hope it's okay."

"Of course it's okay. You know I always make too much food! Come on in, Rabbi."

The rabbi shook her hand and said hello to the kids. In the back of his mind he was contemplating, how could this man, exhausted from a hard day's work, be so cheerful once he entered the door? What a wonderful way to live!

They shared a great meal, had some laughs and the time came for the rabbi to leave. The man walked him to the door, opened it and escorted him out. As the rabbi reached the sickly tree that the man had deliberately rubbed earlier, curiosity got the better of him.

"I couldn't help but notice that you rubbed this tree on the way in."

"Oh that? That's my trouble tree." "Your trouble tree?"

"You see, Rabbi, I often have frustrating days where things happen that weigh on my mind. I guess I'm no different from most people in that regard. But since I get to spend so little time with my family, I need to make sure I am fully with them when I am with them, if you know what I mean."

The rabbi nodded.

"So on my way home after work, I rub all of my troubles off of me and onto the tree branches. When I leave for work in the morning, I stop back and pick them up. The funny thing is, there are never as many troubles on the tree in the morning!"

I like to think of us in the hospitality business as a trouble tree. We never know what kind of mood customers will be in when they arrive at our restaurant. On a basic level, we have to assume that they are out for enjoyment after a long day facing their own set of roadblocks. Whatever their particular circumstances, it is one of our many jobs to do all we can to let their troubles rub off. A happy guest is generally easy to please, but an unhappy guest, well, that's the challenge. To see a guest who came in downtrodden leave with a smile – there's just nothing like it.

We are in the happiness business. No matter what challenges lie in wait outside our restaurant doors, we are there to provide relief while you are behind them.

And on your way out, feel free to leave some of your troubles at the coat check.

### **Help Us Help You (Benjamin)**

“Once we start touching them, they're ours”

I love standing on the front porch at Vetri right before opening, greeting guests as they arrive and wishing them a good dinner as they step inside our home.

The earlier we make our first impression, the better. Everything we say and do, from hello to good-bye, will contribute to whether a guest has a memorable experience or a night they'd rather forget. Similarly, everything they say to us about their experience in real time will make their evening better. The lesson is that once we start touching them, they're ours.

One recent evening I was on the porch with Marc, greeting guests. Everyone seemed pleased, even genuinely excited to be there. You'd think I'd be thrilled, right?

"You know," I said to Marc, "nothing makes me happier than to see these nice people looking forward to a great meal. But at the same time, nothing makes me more nervous."

Marc laughed. "Why?" he asked.

"Well, when they arrive in a bad mood – whether they had a long day or just had to fight through a traffic jam to get here – there are so many opportunities for us to turn that around. The atmosphere inside those doors will lift their spirits. They'll receive a warm greeting and attentive service. Expert wine service will stimulate their mind. And of course, your food is going to blow them away. It's almost like shooting fish in a barrel.

"But when somebody arrives in the best of moods, with the expectation that we will take them even higher, well," I looked at the chef, paused for a moment, and said, "You better go in that kitchen right now and wow those people!"

"You'd better get to work, too," he replied with a smile as he turned to go inside.

It's usually pretty obvious when a guest is enjoying their evening. The challenge is figuring out when they're not. Communication may be a two-way street, but the reality is that many people – for many reasons – keep their discomfort to themselves because they don't want to speak up.

They'll slog through a dish they don't really like, or leave half of it on the plate. They'll deal with a wobbly table and the minor annoyance that brings. They'll eat food that's too salty for their taste. Who knows what else they will suffer in silence.

If I could impart one piece of advice to guests, it is this: On the rare occasion that you don't like something, anything, about your experience, please speak up and tell us. Even if there's something you can't quite articulate, don't worry – we really don't need an explanation. To us, the only thing worse than causing you any measure of unhappiness is having you choose to leave unhappy without telling us.

A dish is too peppery for your liking? You ordered strozapretti thinking it was as thin as angel hair? You thought you had ordered one dish, actually ordered another, but really wanted the one you thought you had ordered? You asked for octopus salad but we sent out octopus pizza? Tell us; you will now enjoy both.

We can and do read many of your behavioral cues throughout the night, and we react accordingly. But we can't read minds. There will always be a certain amount of information that's incumbent upon the guest to relay.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard from diners in the days after they ate with us that not everything was perfect. Perfection is most definitely our goal. We usually achieve it in most people's minds. But for others, it's only possible if we know where we may be falling short.

Though I understand the reluctance to complain, I'd rather recook every dish we serve than hear, days later, the line that keeps me up at night. "Oh, I just didn't want to complain." And: "Everything else was excellent. I just didn't like that one dish, so no big deal." And: "The rest of my group loved it and they told me to send mine back, but I just said, 'It's fine; forget it.'"

You don't need to cause a scene in order to make your needs known to someone on staff. If you feel your steak is undercooked, simply telling us is much more dignified for all involved than angrily calling over the server and grumbling, "What is this, sushi?"

A subtle gesture or meeting of eyes is all it takes to get our attention. More often than not, your server will be checking in on you within moments after you've discovered that you need something, so waiting a few seconds is also an option. Like any other human interaction, the more respect you give, the more you will receive.

Don't worry about how the kitchen will feel when you send back a dish. Hollywood has done a major disservice to restaurant service, as we can all picture the standard scene where a chef is

told that a customer was not happy with a dish, picks up a butcher knife and heads toward the dining room to set the record straight, only to be held back by the nervous line cooks. I hesitate to even address the disgraceful myth that a dish sent back will be returned with more ingredients than normal, if you know what I mean. Trust me: tampering with food never, ever happens. Every person on staff, including those handling food in the back of the house, operates with the sole purpose of elevating your enjoyment and impressing the hell out of you while doing so.

The reason we want to make everything better for you is not to uphold our reputation in the future, but to exceed your expectations of us in the present. So talk to us. We won't bite.

### **Complaints and Comps (Benjamin)**

"You call this medium rare?"

Not for nothing, but there's really nothing worse than doing nothing. Any time a guest expresses dissatisfaction – whether they come out and say it or let their body language do the talking – it's a call to action. If they didn't get the table they'd requested, were perturbed by the loud group next to them or were not satisfied with their salad, the first thing we have to do is to do something.

It always starts with communication, and sometimes it ends with a complimentary dish or even full meal. But like everything else in this business, each case is a unique circumstance and should be treated with the proper response.

The irony is that every problem is actually an opportunity to turn around a frustrated guest. Believe it or not, it can be easier to satisfy a frustrated guest than it is to impress someone who comes in with unrealistic expectations. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the frustrated guest will react to our solution with a positive comment. Those are the moments you live for. But before we get to the happy ending, we have to handle the situation in real time. Which brings me to the question: Exactly what is the guest's expectation for the restaurant to fix a problem? Typically, patrons do not come right out and ask for specific compensation, so it's up to us to assess the issue and match it with the solution that works for everyone. And we always make sure the balance leans in the customer's favor.

In recent years, many of the bigger restaurant chains have created an expectation that any complaint should score you a complimentary meal. The problem with this blanket fix is that it doesn't give the restaurant the opportunity to address the underlying problem for future guests. When I have a bad service experience as a consumer, I always take the opportunity to contact management and express my concerns, but with the caveat that I don't expect anything in return – my only motivation is to help them improve. I've actually turned down free stuff because I am sincere about this. But some people believe that any significant complaint should result in a free ride, and not just for a dish they didn't like – no, they want the restaurant to cover the entire bill.

Before we go there, many things need to be considered.

Sometimes, a simple apology is all that's needed. Consider the common dilemma of a table not being ready immediately upon a guest's arrival. Often guests will grab a drink at the bar while they wait. But if you kid yourself into thinking they're happy being left alone to do so, you'd be wrong. Instead, keeping lines of communication open during their wait significantly mitigates their anxiety. The host or manager will approach several times with updates: "Excuse me, sir, the

table just finished their last course; can I get you anything while you wait?" A couple minutes later: "Ma'am, your table is just about ready. We've dropped the check so it won't be long now." Three minutes later: "We've cleared the table and it's being set up for you now. We'll have you seated in a moment." This constant attention lets guests know things are moving forward, and more importantly, that they have not been forgotten.

Once the meal gets underway, there's a chance someone will be less than thrilled with a particular dish. Probably the most common issue is the guest's perception that a dish is undercooked or over-cooked. And if a dish arrives at the table in any manner other than what the guest wanted, regardless of whether or not it was in fact cooked to perfection, they still have every right to say, "I'd like this cooked differently." And we have every intention to do so, no questions asked.

Even if I had stood at the table while taking the order and said, "You realize that 'medium rare' means it is going to be slightly pink in the center," and it comes out slightly pink in the center, and the guest then says they do not want it that way, I'm still going to redo it. I'm not going to say, "Well I did, in fact, warn you ahead of time that it would be pink in the center ..." That may be technically right, but in the sense of hospitality, it would be wrong.

Speaking of pink in the center, we serve a chicken dish at Osteria that is brined for twenty-four hours and then cooked in a wood burning oven that exceeds 700 degrees. Because of the brining process and the high-temp searing, it's served with a pink tinge in the center despite the fact that it is fully cooked. Many people believe that an undercooked chicken will make them sick. So one night we have a four top that seems to be really enjoying their meal. They cleaned up their vegetable antipasto and a couple of pizzas. For entrees, three ordered pasta and the fourth ordered the brined chicken. Moments after we dropped the plates, the chicken guy called over his server.

"My chicken's not fully cooked; I'm going to get sick," he said with a grimace. "I'm so sorry sir, let me bring it back to the kitchen. I will cook it some more."

Now, you might have expected a different reply, possibly an explanation that this particular chicken dish always has a pink tint. But the server noted the guest's complete dismay and quickly determined that he could have explained until he was blue in the face, but that would not remove the pink tinge and this customer clearly wouldn't have it. So why argue?

If the guest was more inquisitive, an explanation may have sufficed, and a new fan of the dish may have been gained. But as it turned out, "Of course sir, let me cook it some more" is all that needed to be said.

"I don't want it cooked anymore!" the guest said emphatically. "My taste for chicken has just disappeared because this looks disgusting and can't be fixed."

"Okay sir. I'm very, very sorry about that. Let me bring you a pasta dish, or something else, so I can make it up to you."

His friends, who had already started their pasta dishes – a chicken liver rigatoni and ravioli stuffed with porcini mushrooms – raved about their food, trying to put him at ease with the switch.

Most times the server's offer would be happily accepted, and both dishes – the chicken and the

pasta replacement – would automatically be removed from the bill. The server need not even mention those adjustments; the guests will see it when they receive the check, and be satisfied with the result. Usually.

"I don't want pasta. I wanted chicken. But the chicken is bad and you've now ruined my meal."

"Well, I am so sorry you feel that way, sir. I'd really love to figure out a way to make it up to you."

"No, that's okay," he said and continued to pout.

Finally, the gentleman agreed to accept a pasta dish, and he seemed to do quite well with it, cleaning his plate. Even though his obvious satisfaction with the pasta should have meant the case was closed, we decided that we needed to take an extra step to completely win back this customer. So after their main course was cleared, we brought out our fantastic dessert board – a long wooden tray on which we plate almost every single one of our desserts. And on top of that, we sent out some gelato. If killing him with sweetness didn't do it, nothing would.

They ate every last crumb. The whole group, even chicken man, really seemed to have enjoyed themselves. When it came time to deliver the check, the manager decided to handle it personally and to explain what we had done for them.

"Sir, the dessert board is on us, and of course we did take the chicken and your pasta dish off the bill."

Instead of a thank you and a smile, this particular guest went wild.

"What are you talking about? I told the server that my meal was ruined. The entire check should be on you!"

"I don't understand, sir. Everyone else seemed to have enjoyed their meals. We didn't charge you for the dish that you didn't like, and we sent you a couple of free items, which you also seemed to enjoy."

"You don't understand?" he said, with some attitude. "Well what you need to understand is that the customer is always right." That did it. I had to step in.

Now, my staff and I go out of our way to ensure that we are hospitable, but being hospitable never means being subservient or ridiculed. We had done exactly what any other business would have done – replaced a "defective" part with a workable part – and we took it a step or two further. When I approached, the man immediately turned his sights on me.

"How dare you charge me anything for a meal that was ruined!"

"Sir, if I may," I calmly replied. "You sat here for the entire time. You did appear to enjoy everything else, and the rest of your party did as well. We may have misfired on your chicken, and we do apologize for it, but to comp an entire meal just doesn't seem right."

"Well, poor customer service doesn't seem right, either," he said. "You'll be hearing from me."

He begrudgingly paid the check and left. As promised, I received a lengthy email the next day stating that his experience was terrible and that we ruined his night. And although he never touched the chicken, he claimed that he still had the potential of getting sick. And finally, how dare we charge him for a meal he didn't like?

I thought about that for a moment – how dare we charge for a meal that a customer doesn't like? If we operated with that philosophy, we'd be out of business quickly. Not to mention the fact that all the free dishes we comped along our path to the unemployment line would have been eaten anyway. Funny how that works.

Let's consider the opposite situation. What if everybody offered to pay more every time they liked a dish better than expected? Of course, that's not the way the world works. I think most people would agree that this guest overreacted at best, and at worst, they may wonder whether he does this everywhere he goes in hopes of walking away with a fuller stomach and a fuller wallet.

I responded to his email. "Sir, from what I understand, you and I agree with everything that happened up until you received your check. You and your party cleaned up every plate we sent out, save the chicken. We apologized profusely for that one dish and provided several others at no cost. So I'm not entirely sure why you feel you should get a full replacement value for everyone's meal."

His reply was short, but none too sweet. "You just don't get it. Customer service is about the customer. You're wrong. Our philosophies toward pleasing a customer are completely different. You should have paid for our entire night, seeing how you ruined it!"

That really bothered me because I have made a living on pleasing the customer. But at this point, there was no winning. This guest was clearly unreasonable and did not deserve further compensation. There was no way I was giving this guy his money back, but at the same time, I couldn't in good conscience keep it. So I sent off a final email.

"Sir, I don't want to take your money. However, I also don't feel it is right to reward your unreasonable complaint. So I've remitted the entire amount of your check to a wonderful charity, the Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation for Childhood Cancer."

I smiled a little bit when I sent the note, knowing only a monster would reply and demand to receive the money back instead of letting it go to its new destination. To his credit, he did not reply.

And at the end of the day, in some way everybody won. He ended up not giving me any money. I ended up not refunding him. And kids with cancer got a little bit of a boost.

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### **Handling Complaints And Other Special Situations (Eichelberger)**

Anticipating guests' complaints is as important as anticipating their needs. After serving any food or beverage, servers shouldn't disappear. Servers should stay long enough to observe the guests' behavior and reactions and then return after a minute (or less; after the first two bites is a better rule) to make sure everything is still satisfactory.

The truth is, it is likely that someone will have a complaint or other concern. When they do, it's somebody's job to fix it. Problems tend to fall into one of several categories, which need to be addressed in different ways. *The following list of issues usually occurs in this order which mimics the order in which the guest is exposed to the facility/services.*

- Dining room conditions
- Service
- Food and beverage
- Delays
- Work/employee related

### **What is a complaint?**

A complaint is anytime a customer concern or issue is not resolved into a positive ending. Our



goal is zero complaints per shift.

### **Who is a customer?**

Anyone you come in contact with including your co-workers and team members.

### **Six points regarding Complaints**

- Developed over many years at San Chez Bistro with the management team
  - Everyone has a customer
  - Complaints are unavoidable
  - Complaints are learning opportunities
  - Employees should be given the empowerment to change endings
  - Empowerment does not mean "giving away the store"\*  
\*Do not overcompensate for a mistake
  - Employees should not be judged on what the mistake is, but instead on how they resolve it in a positive nature.

### **Dining Room Conditions (Eichelberger)**

One guest says it's too hot, but another thinks the same dining room is too cold. One guest says that the room is too noisy, while another says she can't hear the music well enough. Someone complains that the sun is in his eyes, and another person then summons the server to ask that the shade be lifter because he can't see the sunset.

Every dining room has its own foibles and listening for certain repeated complaints will help you to pinpoint specific problems that need your attention so that you can address common complaints before they happen. There are some situations that seem constant from restaurant to restaurant. Here are a few:

- Elderly guests tend to feel cold more easily than younger guests. When possible, seat them away from any known draft, and when that isn't possible, turn down the air-conditioning a bit.
- Most customers don't like to sit next to the swinging kitchen door. Either don't put a table right next to the door or, if you can't afford not to, at least face the table away from the door or make it a four-top; deuces are more easily distracted because fewer people are talking.
- Sitting next to the band or in front of the sound system can be unbearably loud for most guests. Nowadays, audio system designers tend to distribute a larger number of small speakers around the dining room, which allows for lower volume levels but still ensures that the music can be heard throughout the room.
- Dining rooms that are too dark make it hard to read the menu. Well-aimed lights over the tables or raising the overall light level somewhat will not only solve that problem but also make it easier to see the carefully presented food.

### **Service Issues (Eichelberger)**

Many service problems can be avoided if the manager or captain rarely leaves the dining room. The servers are, because of the nature of their jobs, moving around the restaurant – picking up drinks from the service bar or running into the kitchen to find out if the fried flounder can be broiled. The best solution is to have someone whose main responsibility is to watch the room and

the guests within it. In most cases, it should be a dining room manager, but in restaurants where the tip pool is big enough, you may see additional head servers or captains. The captains can add to the tip pool by selling wine, up-selling the menu, and providing more immediate service than the server is able to.

*Most service issues that are not part of a delay in service, but may cause one in the long run, revolve around server communication errors – miscommunications with guests, resulting in wrong orders, and wrong entries into the POS are very common. What other service issues can you imagine? (Gendler)*

### **Food And Beverage Problems (Eichelberger)**

Either there is something wrong with the product and it needs to be replaced, or the guest does not like it and it has to be replaced.

If an unsanitary foreign object is discovered in a guest's food, ...most people understand that such things can happen – even in the most fastidious establishments – but a mere glimpse of a misplaced hair or insect can spoil the appetite of the most reasonable of people. Some guests may wish to order something different. Follow the guest recovery procedures.

In the vast majority of cases when a guest is unhappy it is because what's on the plate or in the glass is not what they expected. The truth is, if the guest expects one thing and gets another, it doesn't matter how good (*or perfectly cooked*) the food is – it arrived at their table, and they didn't expect it or want it or like it.

Part of the solution is a menu that is clear and easy to understand. The other part is spotting the potential problems with certain types of dishes. *And of course, don't forget highly trained servers that are highly communicative with the guests while selling the menu and its subtleties. (Gendler)*

### **Delays (Eichelberger)**

When a guest has to wait a long time for anything, the server is aware of the problem but may yield to the temptation to hide from the guest rather than face them. This, of course, adds to the guest's frustration. If the server instead goes directly to the guest and explains the delay, the guest, while still somewhat inconvenienced, usually relaxes a bit. In fact, saying something like "The chef wasn't happy with the quality of your main course and is preparing another one for you" can make the guest feel particularly well taken care of – it's nice to know that the chef is watching over you. The key here is, of course, for the server not to avoid the problem – it won't go away by itself. *Also, delays in service will most likely create a domino or snowball effect and ripple through the dining room, kitchen, and sometimes even the reservation system and next turn. Can you think of what may have this type of effect? (Gendler)*

### **Work/Employee Related**

This category refers to the internal customer – we all have several and we are all a customer to each other. We must respect each position within the operation with equal value. Consider the busser or dishwasher. It is unfortunate that some restaurant employees look down upon these positions simply due to their type of work. One must value the fact that without these individual's dedication to their craft, the entire operation would grind to a halt and worse yet, could have serious sanitation issues. They are our customers therefore we must prebus tables as much as possible, stack plates carefully at the dish machine drop area, scrape plates and empty

water glasses carefully so they may turn the dishes over more quickly and safely. In turn, when they feel the respect and value placed in them and their positions, they will perform at a higher performance level. This leads to more and faster clean dishes, which leads to faster and more table turns, equating to more guests being served, leading to more sales, profits, and tips.

Internal complaints can be handled in the same manner as the guest's recovery. The difference may be in the "compensation" of the problem. Obviously, we do not expect a server to "comp" a dish for a dishwasher if the server forgets to scrape plates or is careless and splashes water on the dishwasher while dumping glassware. It would be expected that the employees have enough maturity to discuss the complaint and figure out how to solve the issue. If a solution is not immediately evident, then a manager should be consulted.

There will always be some personality issues in any establishment. Sometimes these types of complaints stem from individuals who are not enjoying the establishment, its customs, rules, culture, etc. In these cases, the solution may be termination. We will discuss culture of an establishment and how it relates to employee expectations in class.

### **Guest Recovery (Eichelberger)**

The term *guest recovery* implies that you had the guest at some point but lost them somewhere along the way, and in a sense that's exactly what happens when there is a problem, whether it is with the food, the service, or the dining room environment. You can sense when it happens – everything is going along nicely, but then the guest gets the wrong food, or it is cold, or it takes too long, and the atmosphere at that table suddenly changes. Many servers will avoid the guest at this point, apparently hoping that the problem will go away if they ignore it, but the only reliable way to get a customer back is to address the problem and the guest directly. Avoidance merely exacerbates the problem. If a server handles a problem quickly and calmly, the guest will usually be forgiving. When something has gone wrong, the best time to correct it is at the beginning, before the guest has had a chance to become annoyed or resentful.

So how do you bring the annoyed guest back? You communicate with him honestly. For example, a guest tells you that his steak is overcooked. The kitchen immediately puts another steak on the grill, but it will take ten minutes to reach medium-well, the doneness the guest requested. The server could avoid the guest altogether, figuring that the steak will eventually arrive. For the guest, those ten minutes can seem like hours, especially if they are not aware that the kitchen is working on the new steak. The guest spends the next ten minutes darting annoyed glances around the room, wondering when the food is going to arrive. It would be better to let your guest know how long it will be until the steak arrives. The guest might be a little miffed but will at least know what is causing the long wait for dinner, and perhaps will be happy to get a little something free out of the deal.

*In my world, you are never going to be judged by the mistake, but instead on how did you fixed the mistake. Furthermore, if there is a complaint and you do fix it, I consider that to have nullified the complaint and therefore the mistake never happened! In fact, you very well may gain more of a loyal customer by fixing a mistake and showing your sincere caring for them and the situation, then if you had delivered flawless service from the begging. Taking care of a complaint is quite a bit of an art form. There is not really a step by step procedure that will work for every incident. However, there are five components of each guest recovery process that do need to occur. (Gendler)*

The basic components of guest recovery are as follows:

1. *Listen to the guest – Don't ignore the issue – agree that there is an issue.*
2. *Apologize – Immediately!*
3. *Correct the problem*
4. *Follow up – make sure that the situation is amicably resolved*
5. *Make it up to the guest – Thank the guest for bringing it to our attention*

*Why is "Follow-up" not the same as "Making it up to the guest"???*

### **Listen - Don't Ignore The Issue**

Approach the guest and ask questions. Then listen intently. Do not interrupt the guest. After they have finished, (if it involves food still at the table remove it immediately – get it out of sight but save it for inspection in the kitchen by the chef – this way if there is a training opportunity or a systemic issue, we can act on it and fix it for the future) ask any needed clarifying questions regarding how to fix the issue, and agree with the guest that there is an issue and how it will be fixed.

### **Apologize (Eichelberger)**

Apologizing is one of the easiest things to do, but too often the power of a simple apology is ignored in favor of much more elaborate schemes. When the slipup is not too serious, sometimes an apology is all you need to appease the guest. In the example given above, the server could go to the guest apologize for the anticipated delay, and perhaps bring the guest a little something to munch on during the wait (*In our case at the Heritage, an intermezzo course of sorbet works wonderfully*). The foundation of an effective apology is, of course, sincerity. To show sincerity, the server should:

- Make eye contact.
- Use the words, "I'm sorry."
- Avoid blaming others.

Making eye contact is not the easiest thing to do. Eyes are indeed the window to the soul, but not everybody wants to look in there. Even if you can't muster the courage to look straight into the eyes of someone who doesn't, for the moment, like you very much, saying you're sorry goes a long way.

Having apologized to the guest, blaming someone else for the slipup can instantly bring into question the sincerity of the person who is apologizing. Most guests realize that the waiter is not personally responsible for the undercooked chicken, but a server taking the blame can bolster the reputation of the entire staff.

### **Correct The Problem (Eichelberger)**

There is a series of basic steps that are key to correcting any problem. These may happen in order or nearly simultaneously if you can enlist help from your team – don't forget to tell the manager too!:

**Listen!** – Find out the guest's version of the problem. Don't assume you know what the guest is upset about. Don't interrupt them.

**Remove the offending item** – If there is something on the table, whether it is food beverage, flatware, china, or glassware that is causing a problem, the sight of it will only upset the guest more – get it off the table right away.

**Take steps to remedy the situation** – Go directly to the person who can accomplish that. For example, if the manager or maître d' is the only person allowed to talk to the chef, then go find him or her – quickly.

**Give the guest an accurate timeframe for the replacement** – Don't forget that when everybody else at a table has their food, an extra five minutes to bring a replacement for one of the guests can seem like a lot longer. Once the wheels have been set in motion to correct the problem, you should go to the guest to let them know how long it will take. An honest and accurate estimate will help you to build your credibility. Be conservative, that is, overestimate the time needed. If the replacement item comes out sooner than you said, the guest should be even happier.

**Bring the replacement personally, if possible** – First, it shows personal concern. Second, it allows the server to immediately confirm the guest's satisfaction, or lack thereof. If a nameless, faceless runner brings the dish to the table, this confirmation cannot take place.

### **Follow-up (Eichelberger)**

Arguably, follow-up is the most important part of the guest recovery process. You could carry out all of the previous steps, but it is for naught if the guest never gets the replacement steak or the drinks that you promised to remove from the check are still there (*again, if they drank them, you cannot give them for free in Michigan – find a different way to compensate the guest*). Any goodwill that you engendered by offering to take care of the guest's bad experience is gone when the guest doesn't get what was promised.

The more often you carry out these steps in guest recovery, the more precise your judgments will be.

### **Make It Up To the Guest (Eichelberger)**

Here is where professional judgment and experience can really come into play. The most important thing to recognize is that there are different kinds of problems, of varying degrees of seriousness. There is no single answer to the question, "What should I do to make the guest happy?" A couple of suggestions:

- Consider each situation on an individual basis.
- Don't always assume that offering a free dessert is the best solution.

The response should match the situation in scale and nature. Before choosing a remedy to the situation, consider both the seriousness of the problem and the type of problem. If the guest is unhappy with a cocktail, a glass of wine chosen by the server or sommelier to accompany the guest's next course is both more appropriate in style and closer in proximity to the problem than a free dessert at the end of the meal (*although in Michigan and other states, free alcohol is against the law and could lead to license removal and fines.*) Or if the guest complains that their appetizer was lackluster, you ask to have a late of risotto sent out along with the main courses – the risotto that you overheard all of the guests discussing, though nobody actually ordered it.

When an entire dinner is ruined by interminable delays, the response needs to be different. Sometimes, it takes a grand gesture such as buying the whole dinner and inviting the guests back for another visit on the house, so they can see what the experience is supposed to be like.

*My rule is that the guest came in with a certain expectation in mind. We need to meet that expectation at minimum and then give them one "Wow!" by going above and beyond that expectation. If you simply replace a mistaken order with the same order, you have not even met their original expectation since there was a mistake involved in the center of their experience.*

*When trying to determine if you have gone far enough, you simply must ask the guest if they are satisfied with resolution. Do not stop offering more until they say "YES". If they are not satisfied with the solution, then start the recovery process over from the beginning...Listen, apologize, fix, follow up...*

*Always inform the Manager of situation so they may document it in the "Log Book". There may be system-wide issues that need to be changed to avoid these complaints in the future. And finally, keep in mind that there will always be a guest now and then that cannot be satisfied – such as the diner that complained how expensive San Chez was as compared to Burger King and we did not have good burgers or fries. "Yes sir," we explained, "It would be better for both of us if that is your expectation, then you should go to Burger King and not return to our establishment. We appreciate you trying us, thank you"*

### **Thank The Guest!**

Yes, thank them for complaining and making a knot in your stomach! Because it gave us an opportunity to fix the situation, make it better in the future, and continue to improve ourselves and our operation.

Note: Many operations have similar but different complaint plans to handle these types of situations. There is no one best method or procedure. For instance, the Amway Grand Plaza Corporation uses the acronym H.E.A.R.T. to orchestrate their complaint plan. Hear. Empathize. Apologize. React. Thank. How does this compare and contrast to what we have said so far?

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### **Phone Etiquette**

First impressions can occur before a guest ever sets foot into the dining room. The person answering the phone must have the same 51%er presentation that the host or manager has at the door. A general script should be set by the management and followed by everyone. It is everyone's job to answer the phone ASAP. If you look up to see if someone is answering the phone, you have waited too long! The phone must be answered within three rings. The script should include a greeting, "Hello, Good Afternoon, Good Evening". A thank you, "Thank you for calling", The location, "the Heritage and Fountain Hill Brewery" The person answering the phone, "this is Adam speaking". And a solicitation/question, "how may I help you today?" Therefore, for our script at the Heritage we will say, "Hello, Good Morning (Afternoon). Thank you for calling The Heritage and Fountain Hill Brewery, this is Adam speaking, how may I help you today?" Once the guest gives you information, repeat it back to the guest to ensure accuracy. "So, that's four people for lunch at noon, Wednesday, September 5th for Julie Vossler; is that correct?"

If the caller wishes to speak with a specific employee (especially the manager, owner or in this case, the instructor, you must ask, "May I say who is calling and what it is regarding?" Once a guests' name is known, use it within the communication. Write it down if necessary or refer to

the reservation system data. “Yes, Mrs. Vossler, we will see you then.” “Yes, Mrs. Vossler, I have made a note about this request on your reservation.”

If you must put someone on hold, ask first and ask politely, "May I put you on hold?" Wait for the answer and don't cut them off. When picking up a line on hold, say "Thank you for holding, how may I help you?" If the wait time looks longer than 2 minutes, ask if you may take a message and call them back ASAP.

### **Table and Seat Numbers**

The dining room must be set up with a system of sections, table numbers, and seat numbers. Start nearest the kitchen on the right side of the dining room and the row of tables going away from the kitchen is the teens. The second row to the left is the 20's, the third row is the 30's and so on. The first table in each row is labeled with a one for instance, the first table in the teens is 11, the first table in the 20's is 21, the first table in the 30's is 31 and so on. This makes the second table in each row 12, 22, 32, and the third table in each row 13, 23, 33, respectively and so on.

Seat numbers are assigned using the closest seat to the kitchen door as seat one and the rest following clockwise around the table. These seat numbers should never change even if a chair is missing or not sat by a guest, it still gets counted. If two people are seated at a four-top, in seats three and four, that is how the orders are rung into the POS system. This way we do not have to “auction off” food because we know exactly where and to whom to deliver it.

You can also communicate by table number and seat number rather than trying to explain, “deliver it to the tall guy with the red shirt”. Instead it is stated, “Chicken to table 22, seat 3”.

### **All Guests Are VIPs!**

Use the CRM to better identify guests, their names (use them!), and their particular needs and wants. Within our OpenTable database system, you will see table preferences, food preferences, things that the guests like, birthdays, anniversaries, etc. We will acknowledge these things as often as we can to make our guests feel special and cared for. We will discuss these items every shift at our premeal meetings.

### **The First Impression**

You get one chance to make a lasting first impression and one chance to make a lasting last impression (Just before they leave your care).

There are so many areas that a guest can have their first impression, whether physical or online. What about the parking lot, lights outside, clean? Lit? Bulbs burned out? Parking attendant, valet, parking structure, outdoor lighting, trash around the street, smells, snow, ice, cigarette butts, etc.?!?! Any of these areas that look subpar, may lead guests to think, “What does the kitchen look like? If they don't pay attention to these details, what else are they missing?!?”

Make sure these areas are built in to one positions job several times per day with documentation and ownership.

And finally, don't forget the bathrooms! Some of the first spaces guests explore are the bathrooms. Just like the entrance, a dirty or unkempt bathroom is a signal to the guest how the

rest of the cleanliness and sanitation is within the establishment. Some guests deliberately go to the bathroom first to judge the cleanliness of the whole place.

### **Greeting And Seating**

Always seat the best tables in the restaurant first. These may be the tables with the best view (window seats – also makes you look busy!) the quietest, the most visible, or the least visible depending upon guest desires. These preferences may be listed in the CRM (Customer Relations Management software) of the reservation system. Always check the guests' notes in the CRM database before seating or assigning tables.

When assigning tables to each server's section, make sure and give each server equal amounts of the best tables. This way when seating on rotation, there is not one server that gets "slammed" with all the best tables.

As new parties arrive, rotate between sections and seat in waves every 15 minutes. Do not overload the sections or the kitchen by over-seating any one time period or 15 minute block.

### **Greeting and Seating (Benjamin)**

"You don't have to see how the sausage is made to enjoy it"

Friends of ours own the fantastic restaurant Arrows in Ogunquit, Maine, and one night some years ago I made a reservation to dine there with my wife. I could have sworn that the reservation was for 6:45 p.m.; that's the time I had written down in my planner. So we showed up promptly with great anticipation.

Well, apparently there is no such thing as a 6:45 reservation at Arrows. We were actually slated for six o'clock and were forty-five minutes late on a busy Saturday night. I was mortified; I knew exactly how bad a mistake I had made. My face turned beet red and I apologized profusely.

"Is there anything we can do? We'll eat fast. We won't order dessert. We'll eat in the car!"  
The host just looked me in the eye, smiled and said, "It's not your problem. It's our problem."

We ended up having a great meal that night after just a slight delay, as they were quick to make arrangements to seat us and serve us, with no strings attached. Clearly it was my fault, but Arrows took the blame and created a solution.

I'll never forget the smoothness and calmness with which they made things right that night, with zero attitude or admonishment. While it's always been our policy in the Vetri Family to fix such mistakes with grace, it was a learning experience to see it from a guest's point of view. Please, don't take this the wrong way and decide it's okay to show up anytime, knowing a solution will always be found! Because when a guest misses their reservation time by more than fifteen minutes, without calling to let us know, it really does screw things up. Actually, it's one of the rudest things a guest can do, second only to those who make a reservation, never show up and never bother to call.

They say you don't have to see how the sausage is made to enjoy it. Some go so far as to say that if you do see how the sausage is made, you may no longer enjoy it. Well, the simple step of



arriving at a restaurant is actually sausage-making at its finest. Just know that all things happen by design, and that it all starts when you walk through our door.

Whatever table-management system a restaurant employs – even if they still use paper and pencil – it is only as good as the person using it. Most of the time that is the host, who is also the first person our guests see upon arrival. Talk about pressure! The host staff is responsible for knowing which tables are almost finished, how many we are expecting to see in the next half hour, which tables are in danger of overstaying their welcome and how much space we have for walk-ins. Not to mention about a dozen other responsibilities. And all this must be done with a sincere smile.

Actually, so much happens in the first thirty seconds of your arrival that we have a separate manual specifically for the host staff. It explains how to operate the computer system to mark a guest as arrived, seated, apps, entrees, dessert and paid. Yes, the host is tracking you throughout the evening, and that information is also sent to the servers, manager, captain and maître d'. The host uses this system to determine the ideal table to seat each guest so that seatings flow as efficiently as possible. She must know at all times how many tables are in each server's section and where each of those parties are in their meal so the servers never get overwhelmed, as well as how many tables that are currently deuces might need to pair with adjacent tables to create four tops and six tops at the next turn. It's a lot to keep under control in a fluid situation where timing is everything and guests' expectations are all heightened. But wait, there's more!

The manual also factors in countless what ifs. What if a guest doesn't like their table? What if a guest shows up late or with more people than originally booked? What if a guest shows up on the wrong day or even at the wrong restaurant? What if there's a traffic jam, the babysitter doesn't show on time, the guest gets a flat tire or six straight tables all decide they're having such a good time that they stay thirty minutes longer than slated? It all happens all the time, and it's all in the manual. We try to imagine and document everything that could go wrong, so that when situations arise, they don't go wrong – and if they do, at least we'll be prepared to make them right. But just when you think you've seen and heard it all, people come up with new and creative situations for the host to handle. Consider this scenario, which often takes place during the busiest time of year.

Dateline: Saturday night, autumn, 7:30 p.m.

"Hi, we're the Johnson party. We have a reservation."

Usually on arrival the party will state their name, number of people and reservation time. When they omit the number and/or the time, it's a dead giveaway – usually done intentionally because they've held to neither and are hoping we have somehow forgotten the details.

"Oh yes. Welcome. I have you down for a party of four. If you could just give me a moment, I will see which tables may be available. We had you listed for a 6:30 arrival."

"Yeah, we ran a little late. Sorry. And oh yeah, we are now six and not four. I'm sure that won't be a problem. In fact, I see an empty table right over there. We can squeeze in if we need to. Sound good?"

**That's not how it works. That's not how any of this works!**

From the guest's single statement, we understand not only their expectations, but how little

wiggle room they're giving us to fix a problem they've created. They indicated they have no understanding of how reservations work; if they did, they wouldn't have arrived so late without so much as a call, and they certainly wouldn't have added to their party without checking availability.

You may sense some attitude here, but I'm just telling it like it is. The more important reality is that we have a strong desire and commitment to please every guest to the extent we can, without compromising our service standards. But really, how does one explain that the empty table over there is actually reserved for a soon-to-arrive four top to a party who apparently has no clue? Delicately!

"Sir, that table is for a reservation that is arriving now."  
"But we had a reservation an hour ago."

I could have told you that was going to be his reply! To which the logical response would be: "Yes, and had you arrived an hour ago, you would now be thirty minutes from departure and we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Of course, that's not what we say. Instead, we say, "Of course, and I am going to find you the best table that would accommodate both you and the soon-to-arrive 7:30 reservations."

It's funny how quickly a guest can assimilate all the training and knowledge that it takes to be a successful restaurant host. Because when the empty table reserved for the 7:30 four top is denied them, they quickly scan the room and move on to Plan B or C or D.

"Excuse me, hostess? I notice that the people over there are finishing their dessert. Should only be a matter of minutes before we can replace them!" Or, "Hey look, that table is getting up. That should work for us, right?" Or, "I just saw that guy pull out his credit card! They must be paying. Let me go get the rest of my party."

In the worst-case scenario, they will start hovering over a table that seems to be nearing conclusion of their heretofore enjoyable meal. No one can hide the hover; it's always as noticeable as a canker sore to the victims. It is in these moments that the job of host expands to include the responsibility of police officer. Hopefully, we are able to encourage the late and extra-large party to visit the bar while we sort out the configuration. Don't forget, it's the busiest time of the year, so while this whole farce is unfolding many other guests are arriving on time and expecting to be seated. And for our late friends, there's nothing worse than to witness other guests who arrived after you being seated in what seems to be your place.

Just trust our plan. Acknowledge your responsibility in the matter, relax and put yourself in our hands. We know who is slated to go where, when they should go there and who is scheduled to be finished when. We also have all the variables covered and can quickly work through it. Our host staff, like hawks seeking prey, have developed a keen thirty-thousand-foot aerial view of the room and see it as one giant slow-moving picture rather than the fast-as-hell slam dance that it appears to be in real time on the ground.

And there's the rub. Individuals, rightfully so, only concern themselves with their own situation. So an empty table shouldn't be empty if they need it, and if they have a reservation and it's past

that time, nobody should be seated until they have been, regardless of any other factors including those of their own making. At times, the two views do collide and, under the wrong circumstances, can create a disastrous situation with angry guests, flustered staff and potentially lost business. But we spend a lot of time with the host staff on what seems like minutiae so that we don't have one hot minute when the doors open. If only guests would realize that the two minutes they spend at the host stand took us hours to orchestrate, just so that we start off their night on the right foot.

So... now that you know what happens when you cross our threshold, there's only one thing left to say.

Welcome! Let's get this party started – even if you're late!

### **What's in a Menu? (Benjamin)**

“This ain't no South Philly red-sauce joint.”

Before we opened Amis, our Roman-style neighborhood trattoria, Marc and I spent a week in Italy sampling typical trattoria dishes. We ordered cacio e pepe pasta at every meal, day after day – not because we loved it, but because it would have been foolish to order it once and think, “Okay, we understand this dish. On to the next pasta.”

What if on the night we had ordered it the chef was having a bad day? What if we happened to walk into the one restaurant in Rome that didn't serve cacio e pepe in the traditional manner? Comparing several versions of a classical dish is a sound way to understand the dish at its core, and on that trip, as always, we were looking for menu inspiration.

Just as the concept, design and physical setup of the dining room come together through inspiration and hard work, the menu requires great attention to detail. Size, shape, material, font style, descriptive copy, item placement, design and the choice of dishes are all carefully considered. Putting together a menu is labor intensive, but it's driven by fun and passion.

There's no blueprint or checklist. We don't say, “Okay, we need one beef dish, two chicken, five pastas.” Instead, it's an ongoing conversation. Our culinary team throws out ideas based on their own travel and hands-on research, study of classic dishes and trends, recipe testing and retesting, seasonal influences and ingredient availability. Gradually, we whittle down the options. If you're going to open a restaurant inspired by a specific culture or region, you need to really delve into the local food in the type of place you're trying to emulate. When Vetri first opened, presented as an authentic northern Italian ristorante, our menu set off many guests and critics who questioned its contents – both what was there and what wasn't.

Our capretto, or baby goat, which I discuss in detail later, was often targeted as “not Italian food” even though it has been a mainstay in northern Italy for generations.

And to this day, we still field questions about the menu's lack of red sauce and garlic – two ingredients rarely used in northern Italian cuisine but popular in the country's south. It took people a while to realize that we really were an authentic Italian restaurant, just not the kind they were used to. Most Italian Americans in Philadelphia trace their roots to southern Italy, and that food has long been the standard in America. It's no different than if a chef from Puglia had taken regular business trips to Dallas for several years and then decided to open an American-style restaurant back home. Odds are, his menu would not include Maine lobster, Maryland

crab cakes or Cajun gumbo, but lots of authentic Texas barbecue. And that would be just fine, but not representative of America.

Once the right dishes have been selected for the menu the rest is all about presentation. A menu's style and design explains what kind of place you are running, and when the menu and milieu don't match, it can be glaring. A fast-casual spot would likely feature cool fonts and text colors, highlighting on certain words, spirited illustrations – or maybe it's handwritten. The menu in a more elegant setting will generally have a much finer script, less flash and more white space.

And what about size? In fine dining, the menu is more reserved and less crowded, so it tends to cover several pages, and that doesn't include the wine list. But our gastropub Alla Spina is more of a bar, so the entire menu fits on one page – we just want you to look it over, choose what you want, get a beer, eat some food and have some fun. At Amis, a step up from Alla Spina, we have bruchettas and appetizers on the left side and entrees on the right, where your eyes are drawn first. Most people choose their entrée first, then decide on a first course. Much thought goes into all of this, and the key is to make it look uncontrived.

But of course, it is contrived. The restaurant industry has commissioned psychological studies to determine where your eyes go when you pick up a menu, revealing a host of subliminal suggestions that can maximize revenue. Knowing how people approach a menu also helps us to make it easier for guests to get the most out of their experience. For example, since we obviously serve pasta, it doesn't have to take up prime location on the top right of the page. One because we know that you will search for it. Instead, that prime space can feature our signature dishes, inspired by our travels in Italy. We devote a section on one of our menus to Il Quinto Quarto, or the “fifth quarter,” featuring variety meats such as tripe, tongue and sweetbreads. We need to highlight these dishes to let those who enjoy them know that we have them.

When a particular dish isn't selling, we'll consider all factors, including its description on the menu, to figure out the problem. The first step, of course, is to taste a couple of different plates to determine if it's the food that needs to be fixed. If we're satisfied with the presentation and flavors, we'll rethink how it is presented on the menu. At Alla Spina we used to offer Welsh rarebit, but it wasn't selling despite the fact that it was absolutely delicious. Someone suggested changing the name to “beer cheese toast” and now we can't keep it in the kitchen.

The irony of menu development is that, after all the time and effort we spend to get it just right, every so often we change it. While certain mainstay dishes will always be offered, others are swapped in and out due to seasonality, availability of ingredients, the weather and really just change for change's sake. You may not want a heavy ragu in August, for example, but come December such hearty food seems just right. At pizzeria Vetri, our menu will include margherita pizza every day of the year, but we only add corn-based pizza in late summer.

The dynamic nature of the menu keeps it interesting not just for guests who visit frequently, but also for everyone in the kitchen. We all love food, but chefs and cooks have a more complex relationship with it. The more they get to experiment and create new dishes, the better for everyone.

### **Selling the Menu and Taking the Order**

Presenting the menu in the correct manner starts the selling experience. Selling and promoting

the food, beverage and ambiance of the establishment to increase check average and repeat business is the primary job of the dining room staff. This means presenting the menu the right-side up and open to the first courses or appetizers. Present the menu from the left with the left hand. If the guest has not put the napkin on their lap and there is nowhere to place it, pause briefly, holding the menu in front of the guest until they take it from you. Start with seat one and follow your nose around the table (backwards) or follow the correct order of service...elderly women first, women, then elderly men, men, etc.

Before the guests begin to read the menu, tell them their server and ensure them that the bread and water (or any first courses) will be out right away. Also, if there are any items 86'd (out of stock), let the guests know right away so they do not get their heart set on a menu item that they can't have. This could lead to disappointment.

Everyone in the direct service to the guest must know all menu items, preparations, origins, flavors, textures, allergens, etc. Simply being familiar or memorization is not enough.

### **You MUST KNOW the Menu**

*"Train your servers to think like chefs," Chef Graham Elliot*

Again, **Everyone in the direct service to the guest must know all menu items, preparations, origins, flavors, textures, allergens, etc. Simply being familiar or memorization is not enough.**

Other things to know:

- Nutritional information (e.g. calories, fat, salt content, etc.)
- Alternative preparations (e.g. substitutions for allergens or dietary restraints)
- Whether or not a dish contains an allergen (e.g., the big seven – peanuts, tree nuts, fish/shellfish, dairy, soy, eggs, gluten, etc.)
- Preparation time
- Country of origin
- Method of preparation and recipe overview
- Flavor pairing – either other courses or beverages
- Plate presentation (e.g. for identification, correct guest delivery, correct placement at the cover – protein at 6 o'clock)

Allergies must be taken seriously – it could be a life or death situation. The establishment must have a stringent policy and procedure for addressing guest's requests about allergens and servers and staff must follow it to the letter.

The policy of the establishment should contain language that ensures that all servers have experienced all foods that they are selling and serving. Restaurants that do not accommodate this type of training because it costs too much, invariably pay for it in the end with unhappy guests or worse. The policy should also contain language that describes how the order and ticket information will flow from the guest, to the server, to the kitchen, and then how the food will be prepared allergen free (gloves, separate pans, utensils, etc.) and then how it will flow back to the guest (server keeps chain of custody, separate tray, announced at the table).

It is better to use this menu knowledge and policy to proactively to catch issues before the food gets to the guest then to try to reactively fix an issue after the food has already arrived to the

guest or worse after the guest has ingested it!

It could be as simple as a guest ordering a pasta appetizer and then an entrée with pasta in it. Maybe the server would simply ask, “since your entrée also contains pasta, would you like to change one of your selections?”

A server must use simple terms to answer questions about food items. Don’t come across as a know-it-all culinary student. The guest really wants to know what it tastes like, not the French definition! Don’t answer a question leaving a guest with more questions. First of all, it is condescending and second of all, it just slows down the ordering process and costs you time and table turning. What is the correct answer to the question, “What is a demi-glaze?” “It is half espagnole and half glaze, reduced by half” or “It’s a rich beef gravy)???

Taste is personal and a server should not inflict their personal opinions upon guests. Just because you love beef, doesn’t mean the vegan wants to hear you describe it or try to sell it to them. The person allergic to nuts, does not want to hear how good you think the pecan encrusted walleye is. First find out what the guest likes, then sell the appropriate items to meet the guests needs and wants.

I have seen over the past 35 years that guests equate knowledge of the service staff to the actual rating of the service itself; Knowledge = service = sales = profits. Don’t skimp on the training!

### **Taking The Order**

The POS (Point of Sale) system has taken over the order taking process in nearly every establishment. However, the foodservice managers that think server shorthand is not necessary, are sorely mistaken. While this may be the case for the tableside order terminals, there is always a need for shorthand when an order needs to be transferred from the server to the terminal several feet away. Or when the system goes down and a server needs to track a table’s order to generate payment. For this reason, I believe each establishment must have its own standardized shorthand for servers. What if a server needs to leave a table or section suddenly and have another take over? What happens if you lose power or have a computer melt down?

Standardized systems must be in place for all possible situations. Not to mention you must be able to read it to enter it into the computer or have your back server do so. Also, the shorthand should match the name of the item going to the kitchen on the screen or ticket. Why bog down the kitchen with “Pecan Encrusted Whitefish” on the ticket, when simply “Fish” will do.

Order entry into these systems must be complete and thorough using the correct course entry procedures. Every system and every establishment will “fire” orders differently. All servers must be thoroughly trained in these procedures, so the kitchen is getting complete and standardized printed orders. Also, policies must be established for modifications to items. Most modifications will cost extra, and servers should not feel free to add things for free just because a guest asks. Standardize modifiers in the POS with costs attached and not allowing modifications by chefs without these modifiers attached to tickets will help control food and labor costs.

When used correctly, the POS system can streamline the communication between the servers and the chefs.

Use a standardized guest check pad to transfer orders from the table to the POS system, a system

of Guest Check documentation must be designed and standardized for the establishment so any server can pick up at any point if a server needs to drop a table or needs help if over seated for some reason. Anticipate problems before they occur and create systems to deal with them proactively. The items on these guest check forms should be the table number, the number of guests, and the server's initials (*or name*), special CRM data from the premeal discussion, time expected, guest's name etc.

Watch for cues from the guests that they either have questions or they are ready to order. They may set or close their menus on the table. They may crane their necks, looking around for the server. Or they may simply begin to converse with the other guests at the table. At this time the server should approach and continue their script. This is approach is after their initial introduction and explanation of the restaurant, menu, specials or 86'd items. "Can I answer any questions about the menu, or would you like to order?" If the guests need more time, the server is in control and excuses themselves. Don't make it awkward by hovering and pressuring a guest who is not ready. If one guest is not ready but others are, again, take control and excuse yourself and assure them that you will return momentarily. Continue to look for cues and return as soon as you can.

Sometimes guests do not pay attention to the ordering process and simply socialize during the beginning of the meal period. We must get the order in. We must turn this table ASAP. It might seem rude to interrupt but it is our business to sell the food and move the guests along. The server must always be "in control" of the table to ensure timely dining and flow within the restaurant. This could also be said of the host while seating, the reservationist while answering the phone, etc. Being in control does not mean being overbearing or rude, but directive in a classy way. If the guests don't order, then we can't serve the food to the guest.

Here are some tactics:

- Try to make eye contact with one of the guests that may not be as engaged with the conversation of the other guests. They might help you with a way in.
- Step up to the table and ask if they would like a few more minutes to order. This can be a subtle way of getting their attention to the menu.
- If there is a concern with timing of their order due to the wave of large orders or many tables' orders to the kitchen all at once, the server can inform the table of this situation and offer to beat the "rush".

## **Taking Orders (Benjamin)**

"How does she remember what everyone ordered without writing it down?"

What's so hard about taking orders?

Guests look at the menu, tell you what they want and you bring it to them. Seems pretty simple, right? I suppose it is, if that's all a diner wants out of the experience, or if that's all the staff wants to give them. With the bar set so low, yeah – anyone can do it.

But not in my world. The fact is, taking and delivering orders is the most critical responsibility of any front-of-house professional, and it entails remarkable mental and physical agility.

It is the server's job to:

1. Greet you immediately when you're seated
2. Answer all questions about beverage service

3. Take and remember drink orders
4. Accurately submit the drink orders to the service bar
5. Deliver each drink to the correct guest
6. Accurately describe daily specials and changes to the menu
7. Answer all questions about dishes on the menu
8. Take and remember your food orders
9. Accurately submit food orders to the kitchen
10. Deliver each plate to the correct guest
11. Clear and reset the table between courses
12. Answer questions about desserts
13. Take and remember your dessert orders
14. Accurately submit dessert orders to the kitchen
15. Deliver each dessert to the correct guest
16. Clear and reset the table after dessert
17. Take, make, and deliver coffee orders to the correct guests
18. Clear coffee service and drop the check
19. Process payment
20. *Thank the guest (Gendler)*

All of the above typically must happen within seventy-five minutes. Meanwhile, each server is simultaneously doing the same for three, four or five other tables. And that's just the nuts and bolts of the process on paper, assuming all goes as planned – which it never does. Those markers don't include running for more water, silverware and drinks; cleaning up spills; bringing unsatisfied diners' plates back to the kitchen to be cooked further or replaced; controlling pauses in service when guests visit the restroom or step outside to make a phone call and numerous other distractions. Whether or not it all works out smoothly, each step must be approached with a smile.

In addition to friendly but not obsequious service, many guests want actual guidance. This can take quite a few minutes to provide, and many hours to plan for. Some ask questions about ingredients, cooking methods, flavor profiles and whether the beef is grass-fed. Other guests have no idea what to order and are just hungry for a good suggestion. Either way, servers must know the menu inside out.

Every server we employ, at all our restaurant, is empowered to answer any question about the menu, thanks to our "rigorous" training methods – i.e., we feed them. There's a lot to learn. One full day of every new training session is spent in the kitchen tasting everything on the menu.

Staff members also spend part of the day watching dishes being prepared so they understand methods and cooking techniques. Training like this has its costs, but the returns are invaluable. Ask a Vetri Family server about any menu item and you'll never hear a toothless reply like, "Oh, that's a great dish," which most guests can tell is a generic non-answer.

We hired a server recently who came from a highly regarded restaurant in Center City where he'd worked since its opening. During training with us, on the day we brought him into the kitchen to taste the menu and watch food prep, he was flabbergasted. He compared our menu training to his last job and said there was no comparison. Literally.



Some restaurants believe that every nickel spent on food needs to bring back at least a dime. It's just about profit at all costs. So preparing food for servers to taste must seem ludicrous to them. The opposite is true in our estimation. You never know what a guest will ask, but you always have to be prepared to answer it. It's not just new servers who get to taste. Each season when we change the menu, every server has the opportunity to eat and learn the entire new lineup of dishes. Best investment we could ever make. When a guest asks about our famous casoncelli pasta, they get a quick but detailed response. It not only gives them confidence to know what they want to order but also gives them a lot more information about the dish, which enhances their enjoyment.

Ironically, it's the generic questions that are literally impossible to provide answers to. "Oh, I don't know what to order. What do you suggest?"

Servers hear that question a lot. To me, it's a trick question. The only acceptable answer is another question, if not a series of them. Whenever I hear a server reply with a specific suggestion from the menu, I cringe. How in the world could they know that would be a satisfactory choice for that guest? The only message such an answer sends is, "You are just an order, not a person."

Instead, a server needs to tease out the guest's desires: "Have you eaten here before? What are you in the mood for – something light, adventurous, classic? What wine are you thinking about? What did you have for lunch? How hungry are you? Do you want to each get something different and share? Do you have food allergies? Are there any ingredients to avoid? Do you have theater tickets or a game afterwards?" Servers don't have to ask a million questions every time; I tell them to just start asking until they see a spark in the guest's eye.

One common accusation about servers making suggestions is that we use them to push certain dishes, whether to move ingredients we have in excess or to sell high-profit items. If such factors make sense in the context of the order, of course we'll suggest them. But there are plenty of times when we make suggestions that actually get guests to order less. Huh?

We serve pizza at a couple of our restaurants, and it's often shared among a table. When all four guests also order an individual appetizer and entree, they're likely be full by the time the dessert course arrives. Depending on the group and the orders, the server may actually say something like, "You know, since you're ordering a large pizza for the table, I might suggest sharing the appetizer courses, too, and making it only two of those. Then order some entrees individually. I would hate for you to get so uncomfortably full that dessert or cheese isn't an option."

Such a suggestion has several effects. It lets the guests know you are concerned with their well-being. It creates trust, which in turn creates repeat customers. And it will likely get them to order four desserts and after-dinner drinks, giving them a well-rounded experience. You've also upsold without hammering them. And if they still don't order dessert, that's fine too; they'll be back! People appreciate such thoroughness. The thing is, we also have to be efficient. While it would be great to stand around and discuss the finer points of grilling vs. broiling, side salad vs. fries, and double bock versus pilsner, remember, we've got seventy-five minutes to turn the table. That's why the best servers have honed their order-taking skills to maximize both efficiency and accuracy.

It is uncanny how a server can stand in front of a ten top, without the safety net of pen and paper, and remember every item ordered by each guest including salads, antipasti, appetizers, sides, and entrees, plus swaps, allergy warnings, cooking preferences, omissions and more. Some use mnemonic devices, often of their own creation and others tune out the guest's extraneous thoughts, debates and stammering to just focus on what is actually being ordered. And when each person has finished, the server can quickly get to the POS system and key in all the info, including which guest gets which plate, with pinpoint accuracy. Some servers do need to rely on a paper trail, but typically they use a self-made shorthand so that they can continue to engage guests with eye contact throughout the process while ensuring an accurate order. That is an absolute must. *(As I said however, the shorthand should be standardized so anyone can step in and help anyone at any time!)*

And then there is the delivery, which should never, ever go like this:

A server approaches a table of two holding two different entrees in his hands. He stops, stands there for a moment, then says to no one in particular, "Who got the pasta?"

There's no excuse for that to ever happen. Every restaurant employs some sort of system that assigns a number or letter to each seat at each table, and the orders include that information. So whether the server who took the order delivers the dishes or they're brought out by a food runner, running a "dinner auction" just shows that nobody really knows what they're doing and creates an embarrassing moment for everyone. It's not so simple after all.

## **Coffee And Tea**

We will dive into coffee quite a bit as the class moves forward. The PowerPoints and lectures have most of the information. This section puts some text to the lectures.

### **Coffee**

#### **A Note on Coffee Consumption**

About 150 million people per day drink coffee in the United States. That's about half the population over 18 years old. The top three per capita consumers of coffee per day are:

1. Finland 3.43 cups
2. Sweden 3.31 cups
3. The Netherlands 3.13 cups
11. United States 2.02 cups

#### **Brief History of Coffee**

The legend states that a goat herder named Kaldi, in Ethiopia observed his goats jumping around and not sleeping after eating the fruit/cherry off a tree. After trying it, he too found a buzz and mental focus. He brought the fruit to the local monastery and the legend states one of two things happened. 1. The Abbott tried them raw and was disgusted with the flavor and so threw them into the fire and the aroma that was produced enticed him to try them again or 2. He was disgusted by the mind altering substance in them (caffeine) and thought it was not religious so threw them into the fire but alas due to the aroma was enticed to try them again. Either way, experimentation followed across the Red Sea in Yemen, and the "beans" found their way into a steeped drink. The stimulant effect was harnessed so that one could spend more alert time studying and praying. So the coffee cherry was discovered in Ethiopia but the growing and

processing of the cherry was perfected in Yemen. The city of Mokka in Yemen, in the 1400's is when the roasted coffee seed drinks began to be known. Due to religious reasons, coffee was kept to this region of the world for nearly 200 years. Not until the 1600s and 1700s did it make its way to other parts of the world. Today it is one of the largest agricultural products in the world (number 3) even though the commodity price hovers only around \$1.00 per pound. Fair Trade coffee only guarantees another \$1.20 over that price. The best way to be "fair" to coffee farmers is with the direct trade process. We source all of our coffee from Ferris Coffee and they use direct trade methods to buy the highest quality lots from the farmers they work with directly paying over 3 times or more than the commodity price depending upon the quality of the coffee.

Our coffee is rated on the SCA (Specialty Coffee Association) scale at over 80 points. This makes it part of the best 5% coffees in the world and is called **Specialty Coffee**. Only coffee rated at 80 points or higher can be called Specialty Coffee.

### **What is Coffee**

The coffee bean is the **stone fruit** of the coffee **cherry**. It is more a peach, cherry, or apricot than any type of "bean". Within the cherry there are two halves of the "stone" or "pit" or seed – this is referred to as the beans – two per cherry. Rarely (5%) a cherry will only have one round pit. This is called a peaberry and can command a higher price if hand sorted out with other peaberries.

The coffee tree is a slow growing evergreen that can take many years, five or more, before it will produce good coffee cherries. First the seed is planted. It takes weeks before sprouting to a seedling, months before it can be transplanted as a foot-tall plant, five years before it starts growing fruit, and then chopped at five feet to help make picking easier. Once the tree is mature enough, once per year, long stalks of white flowers form (Some countries can get two growing seasons in one year). Each flower will be a cherry. They green cherries will ripen to yellow and then red depending upon varietal. When ripe, they are harvested by hand (high quality Arabica).

While there are many varietals of coffee (over 200) as there are apples, generally we concentrate on two major types, **Arabica**, the higher quality and more expensive and **Robusta**, the lesser quality, filler type.

After harvest, the cherries are sorted several times by machine and by hand. to separate ripeness, sugar content, insect damage, size, density, color, etc. This is an extremely laborious process that we will discuss in class.

The cherries must then be processed to remove the fruit from around the seed. This is called processing. There are several different processing methods – wet or washed, dry or natural, or pulped natural or honeyed. Each method creates a different flavored seed due to the amount of time and the amount of sugars that stay in contact with the seed. This in turn affects the flavor, fruit, and acidity of the finished cup of coffee.

The **wet or washed method** removes the fruit from the seed with water and fermentation before the cleaned seed is dried.

The **dry method** leaves all the fruit intact and is dried with constant stirring on raised beds, so the fruit does not mold or rot while it is drying. Once the fruit is thoroughly dried, the hulls are removed from the seeds.

The **pulped natural or honeyed process** removes the fruit mechanically without fermenting it in water. It can be done at several levels. Remove all the fruit or leave any partial amount still sticking to the seed. For example, white honey leaves the least amount of fruit stuck to the seed and red honey leaves the most fruit intact with the seed as it is dried. The differing amounts of fruit left in contact with the seeds results in differing flavors, fruit and acidity in the final cup of coffee.

Then the seed is completely hulled and further dried. Once again it will go through several sorting's, primarily by hand, to remove broken, over fermented or insect damaged seeds. And again, sorted by size, density, and color. These seeds are now in the "green bean" stage ready for shipping in large burlap bags lined with plastic. Essentially these are grain bags to keep the beans from absorbing moisture and flavors along their journey to ports in other countries to be distributed to roasters.

Roasting, just like roasting any food, changes the color and flavor of the seed (bean). The milliard reaction! We will see a roast during our Ferris tour and note the chemical reactions that occur to the seed along the 450-degree 12-minute roast time. We will watch the seed expand as it absorbs heat and energy and begin to crack like popcorn as the moisture begins to escape the seed (Called first-crack). Longer roasting, going into second-crack, makes for a darker, stronger, less acidic, less fruity, more "back-of-the-throat" smoky coffee than does a shorter roasting time – which yields a fresher, fruity, acidic, and lighter beverage. The different roasting times are used to satisfy different tastes of guests and different uses. For instance, a dark roast may be used to have enough flavor to cut through a mess of caramel, chocolate and whipped cream in some commercial coffee drinks. However, a lighter roast would be used for a single origin pour-over coffee where you would want the guest to experience the **terroir**, fruit, and artistry of the farmer and barista preparing the cup. The French term, **Terroir**, defines the overall growing conditions/characteristics of a specific agricultural product. These characteristics of the growing region include type of soil, weather conditions, amount of sunlight, slope of the hill the crop is planted upon, temperature ranges, degree days, and microclimates, humidity, etc. This term originated with grapes for wine and has expanded to most premium agricultural products such as coffee, tea, chocolate, cheese, etc. Different roasts are used to compliment the differing strengths of differing cherry (seed/bean) varieties, similarly how grapes are blended to make wines that showcase the best of each of its varieties.

The different types of roasts are:

Light: Cinnamon, New England, City Roast (Our coffees are mostly in this range – roasted to just after first-crack)

Medium: Breakfast, American, Full City

Medium Dark: Vienna, Continental

Dark: Italian, French, High

After roasting, the seeds are ground on an almost infinite scale from fine to coarse. This depends on the brewing method, filtration, and style of the brew.

Correctly storing coffee is extremely important because it is an agricultural product and begins to break down and "rot" as soon as it is done roasting – the oils oxidize. Whole roasted seeds should be used within a few weeks (4-6) and stored away from moisture, light, heat and air. In

fact, the **enemies** of roasted coffee are those four elements: **moisture, light, heat and air**. Once coffee is ground you have seconds before it begins to break down and deteriorate its flavors, acids, fruit, etc. NEVER pregrind coffee! Always grind it just before brewing. Also, never freeze whole bean coffee – it destroys the cellular structure and affects the moisture content. If you must buy ground coffee, buy it from a producer that packs it in a nitrogen flushed frac-pac. This can then be safely stored for several weeks – but as soon as the package is opened, use it immediately!

Temperatures along the various stages of brewing, holding, and serving the final product are important to maintain coffee's quality.

Brewing: 195-205 degrees

Holding: 175-185 degrees

Serving: 155-165 degrees

Generally, as we transfer the brewed coffee to a new container, we lose 10 degrees. Always preheat the vessel when you can whether that is what we are brewing into, the holding carafe or the cup to the guest. Never serve any coffee below 145 degrees. Once a guest puts cream and/or sugar into a cup below 145 degrees, it will seem cold.

Once coffee is brewed, it also has a very short shelf life. Coffee begins to break down and becomes more bitter and loses its fruit and acidity as it sits. If you preheat an insulated carafe, it can be stored for one hour. In a glass carafe on a burner, it dies within 15 minutes because it keeps cooking.

### **Serving**

To serve coffee, the cup and saucer is always on the table. Make sure to not touch the carafe to the cup during pouring. As with any beverage, we serve coffee from the right, with your right hand. And don't forget to make it convenient for the guest and have the handle at 4 o'clock. Don't over fill if the guest has requested cream and/or sugar. If condiments are requested, those also go on the right side of the guest, to the right side of the coffee cup with any cream pitcher handles at 4 o'clock as well. The teaspoon can be brought down from the dessert set at the top of the place setting or a new one may be placed on the saucer on the right side of the cup, handle towards the guest at 4 o'clock. The cream, sugar, and spoon **MUST** arrive with the coffee! Do not make the guest wait by not asking during the ordering process – you do not want the coffee to get cold while you are running back for the condiments! Finally, ensure the spoon is the correct size – teaspoons for drip coffee and large espresso drinks (Cappuccino or latte), demitasse spoon for espressos and cortados/teacups.

### **Decaffeination**

Decaffeinated coffee contains only about 3 percent of the caffeine of regular coffee. It is important to keep them differentiated in grinders, carafes and at the table for the guest. Some guests have a sensitivity to caffeine that can adversely affect their health or heart safety.

There are four methods for removing caffeine – solvent (70% made this way!), Swiss water, sugar cane EA (ethanol alcohol), and carbon dioxide. Generally, the green seeds are soaked in a solution (water, solvent, CO<sub>2</sub>, or EA). This solution takes much of the flavor and substances out of the seeds including the caffeine. Then the solution is treated or filtered to remove the caffeine. Then the remaining liquid is soaked back into the green seeds. The seeds are then

shipped to roasters. The specific differences are outlined more during the PowerPoint lecture. Our coffee from Ferris is decaffeinated by the Swiss Water method. This is generally thought as the best due to it's chemical free and the beans do not need to be steamed first as in the other methods. Steaming destroys some of the structure and flavor aspects of the seeds.

### **Coffee in American**

Coffee in America is taking a similar path as the craft beer industry. Guests are becoming savvy about varietals, countries of origin, processing methods, roasting styles, and brewing methods. They are beginning to request specific types and styles such as Ethiopian (country), Bourbon (varietal), Natural (processing), light roast, pour over brewed. Chefs and owners must learn along the industry to be able to better supply these requests to guests. Ignoring this growing industry would be like saying I don't need to know about what a cabernet sauvignon from France is or a Double IPA from the local brewery.

Guests may begin or end with coffee. Classically it is served after dessert, but many will want it with the dessert course. When coffee is served before or with the meal, it is refilled for free without asking, until the guest says, "no thank you".

### **Tea**

Not including water, tea is the most consumed beverage in the world. As with all our studied products, tea has a legend of its own. About 5000 years ago an emperor in China had leaves drop into his boiling water and he tasted the resulting liquid. Tea has been found in burial sights over 2000 years old.

Tea first was recorded in Europe by the Dutch in the 1600s. Commercial scale tea production by England began in its colonies of India and Sri Lanka in the 1800s and in Kenya in the 1900s. keep in mind that tea in China and India had been used for thousands of years prior to this.

Tea in the United States is an \$11 billion industry with most of it going to iced tea, 85%. For the chef and restaurant owner, it should be known that the whole leaf tea market is expanding, and consumers are expecting more on our menus as far as varieties, premium selections, and pairings with food.

The major consumers of tea are, in this order, China, Turkey, Morocco, Ireland, Republic of Mauritania, and the UK. The major growers of tea constantly change based on the agricultural conditions but generally the top five are China, India, Kenya, Sri Lanka, and Turkey.

While all tea comes from *Camellia Sinensis*, there are differing varietals that produce different types and styles.

The five styles we will study are white, green (steamed and pan fried), oolong, black, and pu'erh. These styles differ by the amount of oxidation they are exposed to prior to drying and firing. We will discuss more of this during class with our tastings. We will also taste some **tisanes**, herbal teas. These are beverages that contain no tea leaves at all and therefore are caffeine free.

Tea storage is like coffee. It should be kept from light, heat, air, and moisture.

### **Come Again (Benjamin)**

“I also knew I would have to have a talk with the one server still on staff whose name kept coming up in a negative light.”

### **One More Cup of Coffee (Benjamin)**

“We only get one chance to make a final impression”

Sometimes it's the last act of a meal that lingers longest in a guest's memory. So it had better be a damn good one.

Many restaurants seem to consider coffee an afterthought. Sure, they'll ask if you want it, bring it out and maybe even drop the check a moment after setting down the cream. They won't even clear the table after dessert. The feeling is that they've already gotten most of the money they're going to get from you, so they'd rather forego that final \$3.50 and turn your table quicker than treat coffee service as a valued part of the meal. But in so many ways, they're missing the point. In our restaurants, we think of coffee service as perhaps the most valuable \$3.50 of your check. It completes the meal, and without it, we run the risk of having you score us with an incomplete grade. Marc will have none of that. Given all his daily responsibilities, you'd be surprised how much care he puts into ensuring that our coffee service matches the quality of everything else on the menu. He spends time sourcing the best beans and exploring new options that purveyors have to offer. Each of our restaurants is outfitted with top-of-the-line equipment, including antique espresso machines from the Italian company Faema, which Marc has carefully restored to their original grandeur and expert operation. He gives such weight to the entire process that no employee may make coffee without him personally vetting their abilities first! To Marc, coffee is much more than a cup of caffeine. It must be the Italian in him.

In Italy, coffee is an art form. It's no coincidence that so many words associated with coffee – latte, espresso, cappuccino – are Italian, and its importance at the end of a meal there cannot be underestimated. Whereas many restaurants in the States serve coffee and dessert together, the Italian way is to serve dessert first and then coffee on its own at the very end. Some Italians will pay their check after dessert and move the party to a cafe where they know that coffee is taken seriously and will be prepared to perfection. So the onus is on the restaurant to be better than perfect.

We employ the Italian method in our restaurants, with coffee as its own course, even though sometimes we might be better off hurrying through it to get the next group seated. But we resist that urge. Now is not the time to rest on our laurels; it's the time to pull out all stops. So we clear the table completely – not a grain of salt or any superfluous silverware in sight. We cover any spills on the tablecloth with napkin overlays. Every step is part of the overall experience, and it's the foolish restaurateur who does not make that connection.

Coffee service can actually make up for earlier miscues. If we forgot a plate, took too long bringing out a course or missed on a dish, a great cup of coffee during the most relaxing part of the meal can miraculously smooth things over. Maybe we even bring out a gratis glass of grappa with your final beverage. Or I'll sit down and share a brandy with you, or just linger for a moment of conversation, adding to the sense of comfort as you wind down. It's the bottom of the ninth, two outs, bases loaded, full count and we're down a run. Are we gonna look at strike three,

or take our best cut and knock it out of the park?

Sometimes coffee is more than just coffee, and it's always worth more than the few bucks it costs. Compared to dating, it's no less important than the kiss good-bye. When done right, you are setting yourself up for another. But a bad last impression could deep-six any opportunity for future romance. It's why we give coffee the importance that we do. If we can leave you fully satisfied, we know there's a great chance we'll be serving you another cup of coffee soon.



# Section 2

## **The History of Dining Simplified:**

(This will be a choice for one or two students for our Research Paper and Presentation Project– first come first served)

### **The Ancient World**

2000-5000 years ago:

Dining was based upon status. The person who ranked the highest within the group would choose the largest and best selections. Status would then dictate who would come next, and so on.

Greek and Roman banquets occurred for the wealthy in private homes or halls. These were also governed by strict status and ranking rules. The leader of the group sat at the head of the table and guests had their positions assigned by how their status or rank followed. The remains of this type of seating arrangements is still followed when the guest of honor is seated to the host's right.

### **The Middle Ages And The Renaissance**

The same type of status dining took place within castles. Flatware was supplied by each individual diner. BYOF if you will. Stale bread (trencher) was commonly used as utensils and food was eaten by hand with the main utensil being a spoon.

By the 1300s, dining started to evolve as an art form. Books were written of etiquette and table settings.

The Renaissance, 1400s, brought more fancy dining as entertainment. Dirty wooden tables were covered with the first tablecloths. The laws of who could produce which type of foods developed. These were called Guilds. To produce a certain type of food such as meat, soups, and pastry, one must belong to the guild. And only those types of foods could be produced.

The 16th and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries encouraged actions such as hand washing, better use of specific utensils, passing of foods rather than reaching to the center.

The first remnants of the new dining room brigade emerged.

### **1700s The Modern Restaurant**

Table d'hote ("the host's table," or prix fixe menus) emerged. One set (fixed) menu: with a set price (Prix).

Coffee houses began to spring up as an alternative to pubs.

The first modern restaurant within Europe was opened by A.B. Beauvilliers in 1782,, Le Grand Taverne de Londres in Paris. This was one of the first to have an a la carte menu, which simply meant that a guest ordered off of a written document, the menu, as we call it. Marie-Antoine Carême, the famous historical French chef began to emerge at this time along with his Grande Cuisine.

## **The Nineteenth Century**

The first Michelin Guide came out in 1900 to address the need for quality while motorists cruised the countryside. The industrial revolution within North American culture valued efficiency, technology, low cost items and the necessity to feed a large mobile and moving population across a large expanding new country. Due to this need, the agricultural, transportation, and food-processing industries changed to meet this need.

In America we started out trying to be like the European dining scene that came before us and that led to the echoing of French and Russian service. While America tried to copy, it soon needed to develop its own tastes and service expectations to meet the needs of the growing population and land expansions.

Today, extraordinary service is now expected in any of the levels of food service known today whether it is fast food, fast casual, casual upscale or fine dining. **It is no longer just a luxury of the wealthy. These traits of extraordinary service are expected at every level by every diner.**

To provide this level of expected hospitality, you need people, good people, people that will differentiate your establishment from all others. Any food service operation can copy and emulate any food or recipe. They can buy the same products as anyone else. The only item that truly makes a place unique is the people/employees.

The people (your employees) and the interactions with guests that they can create cannot be duplicated by anyone else. So these folks need to be the best!!!! Find them, screen them, and hire them.

## **The 51% Solution (Danny Meyers)**

I first learned this concept of “51 percent” from the dynamic restaurateur Rich Melman of Chicago, when I visited him in the late 1980s. Rich was an effervescent teacher and a willing mentor, and I was eager and honored to learn from him. The concept made perfect sense to me, and now it is a cornerstone of my business. Our staff performance reviews weigh both technical job performance (49 percent) and emotional job performance (51 percent) – how staff members perform their duties and how they relate to others on a personal level. In some respects this is another intentional business strategy based on instincts I developed while I was growing up. Among my friends were plenty of good athletes and talented students. But far more important to me than a friend's skills was always his or her goodness as a person.

Imagine if every business were a light bulb and that for each light bulb the primary goal was to attract the most moths possible. Now what if you learned that 49 percent of the reason moths were attracted to a bulb was for the quality of its light (brightness being the *task* of the bulb) and that 51 percent of the attraction was to the warmth projected by the bulb (heat being connected with the *feeling* of the bulb). It's remarkable to me how many businesses shine brightly when it comes to acing the tasks but emanate all the warmth of a cool fluorescent light. That explains how a flawless four-star restaurant can actually attract far fewer loyal fans than a two- or three-star place with soul. In business, I want to be overcome with moths. Our staff must be like a scintillating string of one-hundred-watt light bulbs, whose product is the sum of 51 percent feeling and 49 percent task.

It is my firm conviction that an executive or business owner should pack a team with 51 percenters, because training them in the technical aspects will then come far more easily. Hiring 51 percenters today will save training time and dollars tomorrow. And they are commonly the best recruiters for others with strong emotional skills. Nice people love the idea of working with other nice people.

Over time, we can almost always train for technical prowess. We can teach people how to deliver bread or olives, take orders for drinks or present menus; how to describe specials and make recommendations from the wine list; or how to explain the cheese selection. And it's straightforward to teach table numbers and seat positions to avoid asking "Who gets the chicken?" (That question sounds amateurish and makes a guest feel as if the waiter didn't pay attention to him or her in the first place.) A cook needs to know from his chef precisely what the sautéed sea bass is supposed to look like when it's sautéed properly, how it tastes when it is seasoned perfectly, and what its texture should be when it has been cooked gently and properly. We can and do train for all that. Training for emotional skills is next to impossible.

We aim to hire people who possess an emotional skill that Chef Michael Romano calls the *excellence reflex*.

People duck as a natural reflex when something is hurled at them. Similarly, **the excellence reflex is a natural reaction to fix something that isn't right**, or to improve something that could be better. The excellence reflex is rooted in instinct and upbringing, and then constantly honed through awareness, caring, and practice. The overarching concern to do the right thing well is something we can't train for. Either it's there or it isn't. So we need to train how to hire for it.

We don't believe in pursuing the so-called 110 percent employee. That's about as realistic as working to achieve the twenty-six-hour day. We are hoping to develop 100 percent employees whose skills are divided 51-49 between emotional hospitality and technical excellence. As I've mentioned above, we refer to these employees as 51 percenters.

To me, a 51 percenter has five core emotional skills. I've learned that we need to hire employees with these skills if we're to be champions at the team sport of hospitality. They are:

1. Optimistic warmth (genuine kindness, thoughtfulness, and a sense that the glass is always at *least* half full)
2. Intelligence (not just "smarts" but rather an insatiable curiosity to learn for the sake of learning)
3. Work ethic (a natural tendency to do something as well as it can possibly be done)
4. Empathy (an awareness of, care for, and connection to how others feel and how your actions make others feel)
5. Self-awareness and integrity (an understanding of what makes you tick and a natural inclination to be accountable for doing the right thing with honesty and superb judgment)

I want the kind of people on my team who naturally radiate *warmth*, friendliness, happiness, and kindness. It feels genuinely good to be around them. There's an upbeat feeling, a twinkle in the eye, a dazzling sparkle from within. I want to employ people I'd otherwise choose to spend time with outside work. Many people spend a large percentage of their waking hours at work. From a

selfish standpoint alone, if that's your choice, it pays to surround yourself with compelling human beings from whom you can learn, and with whom you can be challenged to grow.

When we look for *intelligence*, we're thinking about open-minded people with a keen curiosity to learn. Do they ask me questions during interviews? Do they display a broad knowledge about a lot of subjects, or a deep knowledge about any one subject? A hallmark of our business model is to continually be improving. I need to stock our team with people who naturally crave learning and who want to evolve – people who figure out how each new day can bring rich opportunities to do something even better. Striving for excellence, as we do every day, requires curious people who also take an active interest in what their teammates do. I appreciate it when waiters want to learn more about cooking. I love it when cooks want to learn about wine. I adore it when hosts and reservationists want to learn more about the person behind the name they are greeting on the phone or at the front door.

A strong *work ethic* is an indispensable emotional skill for any employee who is going to contribute to the excellence of our business. We want people on our team who are highly motivated, confident, and wired to do the job well. It's not hard to teach anyone the proper way to set a beautiful table. What is impossible to teach is how to care deeply about setting the table beautifully. When I walk into any one of our restaurants as its dining room is being set up for service, one of the most lovely sights to me is a waiter lifting a wineglass off the table, holding it up to the light, and checking for smudges. This is not because I'm an unreformed smudge freak, but because someone is showing care for a small detail – smaller even than what the average guest may notice. When an employee does not work out, the problem more often stems from an attitude of “I won't” rather than “I can't.”

A high degree of *empathy* is crucial in delivering enlightened hospitality. Empathy is not just an awareness of what others are experiencing; it's being aware of, being sensitive to, and caring about how one's own behavior affects others. We want waiters, for example, who can approach a new table of guests and intuitively sense their needs and agenda. Have they come, for example, to celebrate or to conduct business? Are they here to experience the cuisine, or simply to connect with a colleague over a light meal? Do they want extra attention from the restaurant, or would they prefer to be left alone?

Guests may think they're dining out to feel nourished, but I've always believed that an even more primary need of diners is to be nurtured. The most direct and effective way to let our guests know that we're on their side has always been to field a team that exudes an infectious kind of empathy. No business can truly offer hospitality if the preponderance of its team members lack empathy. But when each member of the team goes to bat for the others, the mutual trust and respect engendered among them creates an infectious environment of caring for our guests.

*Self-awareness* and *integrity* go hand in hand. It takes integrity to be self-aware and to hold oneself accountable for doing the right thing. I want to work with people who have a handle on what makes themselves tick. Self-awareness is understanding your moods (and how they affect you and others). In a sense, it is a personal weather report. Is the mood dry or humid? Is it raining or stormy? Is it warm and sunny or chilly and cloudy? The staff members' individual and collective moods influence the customers' moods; and in the intricate, fast paced dance between the kitchen, dining room, and guests during a meal – when hundreds of people are served – it's crucial for my staff members to be aware of and accountable for their own personal “weather

reports.”

No one can possibly be upbeat and happy all the time. But personal mastery demands that team members be aware of their moods and keep them in check. If a staff member is having personal trouble, and wakes up angry, nervous, depressed, or anxious, he or she needs to recognize and deal with the mood. It does not serve anyone's purposes to project that mind-set into the work environment or onto one's colleagues. We call that “skunking.” A skunk may spray a predator when it feels threatened, but everyone else within two miles has to smell the spray, and these others may assume that the skunk actually had it in for them. It's not productive to work with a skunk, and it's not enjoyable to be served by one either. In a business that depends on the harmony of an ensemble, a skunk's scent is toxic.

It may seem implicit in the philosophy of enlightened hospitality that the employee is constantly setting aside personal needs and selflessly taking care of others. But the real secret of its success is to hire people to whom caring for others is, in fact, a selfish act. I call these people **hospitalitarians**. A special type of personality thrives on providing hospitality, and it's crucial to our success that we attract people who possess it. Their source of energy is rarely depleted. In fact, the more opportunities hospitalitarians have to care for other people, the better they feel. No matter how focused or purposeful we are when we hire, we've still made plenty of mistakes. Most of those mistakes have occurred when we've misread an employee's emotional makeup. Technical strengths and deficiencies are relatively easy to spot. I can watch any cook sautéing a piece of fish for sixty seconds and gauge whether or not he has what it takes. I can watch a server and determine immediately if he or she has the ability to take orders gracefully. Emotional skills are harder to assess, and it's usually necessary to spend meaningful time with people – often in the work environment – to determine whether or not they're a good fit. But it's critical to begin by being explicit about which emotional skills you're seeking. Doing that – even if you do nothing else – greatly increases your odds of success.

For years, we've used a system called “trailing” to test and hone a prospect's technical skills – the 49 percent – and to begin to assess his or her emotional skills, the 51 percent. Trailing is a combination of training and auditioning; it's rigorous and sometimes awkward. We generally keep people on probation until we've first observed their behavior within the real environment of the dining room or kitchen, and until we've assessed their overall fit with our team. We're upfront about this process, and we tell candidates that we also expect them to audition us as prospective employers. We urge those who trail to ask themselves, *Is this really the kind of place I'm going to want to spend one-third of my time? Is this place going to challenge me and make me feel fulfilled?*

Our frontline managers arrange for trails in each job category. Most prospective employees go through four, five, or six trails, during meal periods and often trail with a different waiter or cook each time. For each trail after the first, there is a specific and increasingly advanced list of what needs to be learned and accomplished during that session. Trails begin with a physical orientation to the restaurant and culminate with “taking a station” while being closely monitored by the trainer. Trailers are paid for their shifts, whether they're hired or not. In the dining room, our guests can tell who the trailers are by the fact that they are not wearing an official uniform, or by noticing that a trainer is the one standing back, observing.

Our training is designed not as a hazing, but as a healthy way to foster a stronger team. Staff

members, by being directly involved in the decision making, have a good deal of influence over who is hired and thus a stake in the ongoing success of the outcome. Trailers don't advance to their second trail unless the first trainer recommends this to the manager; they don't move on to their third unless the second trainer endorses it; and so on. After five or six trails we end up with a well-trained candidate who has also been endorsed by as many as half a dozen team members. And the candidate doesn't move along unless he or she agrees that the fit seems good. By creating a built-in support system for new hires, we greatly enrich the subsequent team-building experience.

What is almost impossible to train for is the emotional stuff; **identifying hospitalitarians is a tricky skill to teach**. I know I have a knack for looking across a table and sensing that a person is, or is not, the right fit for us. But how do I make the subjective *objective*, and the implicit *explicit*? One effective way to articulate my gut feelings to others doing the hiring is to teach them how to listen to their own gut feelings. To do that, I ask managers (whose intuition and judgment we trust, or they wouldn't be managers) to pose themselves three fundamental hypothetical situations when they are hiring.

**Situation 1:** Think of someone you know well (a spouse, best friend, parent, sibling) who has an uncanny gift for judging character. If this person were on a jury, he or she could take one look at the defendant and almost always render a correct verdict. For me that someone is my wife, Audrey, who is eerily adept at reading character and integrity and who, in a flash, can almost always tell if what you see is what you get. So the first check is to imagine that you have invited the prospective employee to your home for dinner with your judge of character. The three of you discuss many things over a two-hour dinner. When the prospect leaves and the door closes behind him or her, what will be the first thing your character judge says? “What the hell are you thinking?” Or, “Hire that person immediately!” For judges of character, there is no such thing as the color gray.

**Situation 2:** Imagine your keenest rival in business – if you're the Yankees, say, then it's the Red Sox. Then imagine that the day you make a job offer to a prospect, he or she calls you back and says, “Thanks, but I just got a great offer from the Red Sox and I'm taking the job with them.” Is your immediate reaction “Shit, we blew it!” Or, “Whew, we've dodged a bullet!” Ask yourself. Sometimes I'll go too far down the road in a hiring situation with someone who isn't quite right for our team. I am still amazed at how often I have felt enormous relief when someone we've actively pursued ends up taking another job. This leaves me asking myself how I let the interviewing process get so far in the first place.

I'm aware that one of my blind spots when hiring is my natural inclination to make other people feel comfortable. This impulse is so powerful that I tend to have a tough time turning it off when it's inappropriate – for example, in a job interview. It's not my job to soothe prospective employees. It's my job to assess whether they'll be a good fit for our team. That takes self-awareness. Unless we have tools like gut checks, it's very easy to get trapped into making some dangerous mistakes.

**Situation 3:** Most business owners or managers have a core group of customers or other people whose opinions carry special weight for them. In our industry, such a person could be a restaurant critic, who, if he or she writes for a major publication, shares those opinions with perhaps a million readers. For me personally, the person could be my mother or one of my siblings – after all these years, they know how to push my buttons (and I know how to push

theirs). It could also be a frequent guest who always tells me exactly how he or she feels about a meal – and is loyal enough to return no matter how the last meal turned out. So, imagine that this person with an especially weighty opinion drops in unannounced to dine, and there is only one table left in the restaurant – a table that will be served by the person you are considering hiring. Is your reaction “Great!” or is it “Oh, no!”

When all three situations leave you feeling positive about the prospect, you're on the right track. If any *one* of them doesn't, it's time to fold the hand. I rarely interview a candidate until two or three other managers have first had an interview with him or her. Since our restaurants thrive on a team spirit, I prefer to hire by consensus. I ask our managers to pursue a candidate's relevant job references; I ask them to take personal notes and then rank the strength of each one of the candidate's five emotional skills on a scale of zero to five; and I ask them to consider and react to the three hypothetical situations and then listen with their guts.

**Finally**, I ask our managers to weigh one other critical factor as they handicap the prospect. Do they believe the candidate has the capacity to become one of the top three performers on our team in his or her job category? If people cannot ever develop into one of our top three cooks, servers, managers, or maître d's, why would we hire them? How will they help us improve and become champions? It's pretty easy to spot an overwhelmingly strong candidate or even an underwhelmingly weak candidate. It's the “*whelming*” candidate you must avoid at all costs, because that's the one who can and will do your organization the most long-lasting harm.

**Overwhelmers** earn you raves. **Underwhelmers** either leave on their own or are terminated. **Whelmers**, sadly, are like a stubborn stain you can't get out of the carpet. They infuse an organization and its staff with mediocrity; they're comfortable, and so they never leave; and, frustratingly, they never do anything that rises to the level of getting them promoted or sinks to the level of getting them fired. And because you either can't or don't fire them, you and they conspire to send a dangerous message to your staff and guests that “average” is acceptable.

There are a lot of jobs to fill in the restaurant business, and it can be frustrating, especially in a tight labor market, to impose our own stringent limitations on whom we can and can't hire. When a chef has been short a line cook for three weeks and finally finds a technically outstanding cook who isn't quite a 51 percenter, should we really pass on the candidate? Absolutely. I'm not impressed by a candidate's technical prowess if the meaningful emotional skills aren't already in place. Each of our restaurants is created with its own distinct cuisine and its own distinct decor, but caring hospitality must be a common trait that flows clearly through all of them. I tell new employees right off the bat that for their salary review, 51 percent of any raise or bonus is set by how they're faring at the emotional skills necessary to do their job well, and 49 percent is tied to technical performance. That's the perfect balance for us, and it's the currency of our company.

### **Final note on employee evaluations, reviews and raises**

Given the above cultural and performance demands, an organization must have a way of documenting how and who is meeting these expectations and to what degree. The Employee Evaluation must be performed by management on a regular basis. The employees need to know how they are performing and be rewarded for it and the management team must know who the great performers are, and who may need some assistance.

Reviews and evaluations can be set at needed intervals for your specific operation; however, I

would recommend annual reviews and raises at minimum. Upon first hiring a new employee, you may want to do a 30, 60, 90 day review plan throughout the probation and training period in addition to the annual reviews.

So, let's set the stage for some rhetoric.... Let's say you have a score of 1 through 4 in several categories on the review. Let's say a 2 is not acceptable, a 3 is, and a 4 is above and beyond expectations. Policy needs to be outlined for these scores. For instance, I would never want any employee scoring below a 3 in any category. If this were to occur, then the employee would need to be put on a performance improvement plan and given a finite period of time to bring the performance back up to a 3 and keep it there. If there were repetitive performance issues in the same category, after the 3<sup>rd</sup> retraining period, it would be time to terminate the employee.

But here is the most important point...If an employee ever gets to an annual review and scores less than a satisfactory score in any area, I do not view that as an employee issue, but a management issue. You must have managers that can spot the underperforming categories throughout the year and get those employees on extra training and improvement plans prior to any review. This means that you build a team that is always scoring a satisfactory or higher score every time.

Discuss examples of good service.

Discuss examples of poor service.

### **Create the Buzz...**

#### **Front Of The House: Forward by Chef Marc Vetri (Benjamin)**

For years, we saw an influx of reservation requests directly attributable to Zagat. People used it as their dining bible. How it worked so effectively was beyond me, as I could never get around the obvious questions: Were those reviewers vetted? Were they experts? Were they sincere? Who knows? ... (*Today the same thing could be said about any social media poster, blogger, vlogger, My Spacer, Xangaer, Instagrammer, Facebooker, Pinterester, Tick Tocker, etc.!!!*) ... whether someone spreads the word by phone, email, tweet, text or in person, as long as we give them the right promotional materials – a delicious meal, memorable atmosphere and singular service – we like our chances of getting their recommendation.

#### **Going Out To Dinner (Benjamin)**

“That personal level of service helps us to not only attract diners to our place, but also create regulars”

#### **Turning Over the Rocks (Danny Meyers)**

I have been fly-fishing only once in my life. It was in Woody Creek, Colorado, outside Aspen, and I went with a young guide who had come highly recommended by the original chef at Eleven Madison Park, Kerry Heffernan (no relation to my wife, Audrey), an expert fly-fisherman. My guide, displaying wisdom that belied his age, called me over as he waded into a clear, rushing stream, and picked up a small rock. He turned it over and smiled. From a distance, I noticed nothing unusual on its slick underside. I had no idea what he was looking for, or at. “Here, come look,” he said. He pointed out dozens of tiny aquatic insects hatching on the rock. This told him precisely which fly to tie because, as he explained, the trout would only bite on an artificial fly that resembled what was actually hatching. The guide then put the stone back



exactly where he had found it. I was intrigued. There was a world of information under that rock, if only one knew or cared enough to look for it.

I took a valuable business lesson back home to New York. There's always a story behind a story if you look for it; and you can augment your success at “hooking” customers by taking the care, time, and interest to look. On my rounds in our dining rooms, I'm constantly turning over rocks, hunting for those details – a guest's impatient look or a glance at a watch, an untouched dish, a curious gaze at our artwork. These details could indicate that someone is bored, impatient, in need of affection, puzzled, interested, or just daydreaming. But each gesture is a potential opportunity for me to visit the table and provide some hospitality.

It's human nature for people to take precisely as much interest in you as they believe you're taking in them. There is no stronger way to build relationships than taking a genuine interest in other human beings and allowing them to share their stories. When we take an active interest in the guests at our restaurants, we create a sense of community and a feeling of “shared ownership.”

Shared ownership develops when guests talk about a restaurant as if it's *theirs*. They can't wait to share it with friends, and what they're really sharing, beyond the culinary experience, is the experience of feeling important and loved. That sense of affiliation builds trust and a sense of being accepted and appreciated, invariably leading to repeat business, a necessity for any company's long-term survival.

And it all starts by turning over the rocks.

I'm constantly reminding our staff members to initiate a relationship with our guests whenever it's appropriate. For example, it's amazing how powerful it can be simply to ask guests where they are from. Often, that leads to making a connection because we know someone in common, or we've enjoyed the same restaurant, or we can share a sports story. The old game of “Do you know So-and-so?” is a classic example of turning over rocks to further human connection. And it works. When you are considering several restaurants for dinner, other things being equal, you'll choose the one whose maître d' went to the same school as you, or roots for your sports team, or has the same birthday as you, or knows your second cousin. You'll also tend to choose a restaurant whose chef came out to greet you on your last visit, or who saved you the last soft-shell crab special, knowing it was a favorite of yours. The information is always there if it matters enough to look for it.

Making my rounds in the dining rooms involves, more than anything else, my ability to see, hear, and sense what's going on so that I can connect intelligently with our staff and guests and make things happen. I don't have a standard approach for every table, but I often start with a gut sense that a patron is ready for a visit. That's what springs me into action. I might just walk over to a table and say, “Thanks for being here. “That puts the ball in the other court. The encounter either does or doesn't advance from there. But once the rock is turned over and a dialogue begins, I start to learn something, and I always act on what I learn. (And sometimes I learn that the person just wants to be left alone to eat dinner.)

One night in April 2002, soon after opening our barbecue restaurant Blue Smoke, I noticed a couple in the back room gazing out at the trees in the courtyard. I could sense that they were debating whether they liked their ribs, so I went over to greet them. “Where are you from?” I

asked.

“We're from Kansas City,” the man said.

“We're going to have a tough time living up to the barbecue standards of your hometown,” I replied.

As we chatted, I also learned that they had recently moved to New York and that they were very happy to have discovered a real pit barbecue place in their neighborhood. “I only wish we didn't have to make reservations for barbecue four weeks in advance,” the man said. I told him that we had just decided to leave half the tables open for walk-ins as a way of encouraging spontaneous visits to the restaurant. That news pleased them. Then the man added, “You know, in Kansas City they give you more than one kind of sauce. Would you ever consider serving a sweeter and spicier sauce than this?”

My hunch was right: something had been on their minds. Now I knew what it was, and also how to make a connection. “It's interesting to hear you say that, because we're actually working on a Kansas City-style sauce right now in the kitchen. Would you like to be the first guests to try it?” I went to the kitchen for a pitcher of that sauce and brought it back out to the table. The man poured some on his brisket (something a Texan would *never* do). “This,” he said beaming, “takes me home!” I asked for his business card, and later wrote him a note when Blue Smoke began offering Kansas City-style barbecue sauce.

I'm certain that this couple felt a sense of ownership in the restaurant after our encounter. As far as they were concerned, they were in part responsible for our putting the new sauce on the table. That's the kind of dialogue we want to have. Hospitality can exist only when there is human dialogue. This particular dialogue provided great customer feedback and helped forge a bond with two customers – not a bad investment of six minutes of my time!

I try to be in the restaurants as often as possible. For nearly twenty years, until the opening of The Modern on West Fifty-Third Street, all my restaurants were within a ten-minute walk of one another and my apartment – and I made it my business to visit every one of them during lunch. I'm not there just to greet and shake hands. I'm building daily communities within the restaurant's larger community.

The best way to do this is to first gather as much information as I can about our guests. I call this “collecting dots”. In fact, I urge our managers to *ABCD – always be collecting dots*.

Dots are information. The more information you collect, the more frequently you can make meaningful connections that can make other people feel good and give you an edge in business. Using whatever information I've collected to gather guests together in a spirit of shared experience is what I call connecting the dots. If I don't turn over the rocks, I won't see the dots. If I don't collect the dots, I can't connect the dots. If I don't know that someone works, say, for a magazine whose managing editor I happen to know, I've lost a chance to make a meaningful connection that could enhance our relationship with the guest and the guest's relationship with us. The information is there. You just have to choose to look.

I always try to sense opportunities to glean information, and it's not limited to information about our guests. I will often just stand on the periphery of the dining room and watch. I gauge the temperature of the room, the smell, and the noise. Most important, I watch my staff members. Are they enjoying one another's company? And are they focused on their work? If the answer to both questions is yes, I feel confident that we're at the top of our game.

Think about every time you've walked into a restaurant or an office, or even looked into the dugout at a baseball game. When the team is having fun *and* is focused, the chances are very good that the team will win.

I study the faces of our guests. If I see that the direction of their eyes intersects at the center of the table, I know that they are actively engaged with one another and I'm confident that everything is fine. This is an inopportune time (*meaning the wrong time*) to visit. Guests dine out primarily to be with one another, and their eyes tell me they are doing precisely what they came to do.

Whenever I see that the direction of someone's eyes is not bisecting the center of the table, then a visit may be warranted. I am not certain that something is wrong, but I am certain that there is an opportunity to make a connection without feeling like an intruder. It could be that a guest has been waiting too long for his or her food and is looking for a waiter. It could be that someone is simply curious about the architecture, a work of art on the wall, or, for that matter, an attractive guest across the dining room. Or a guest could be momentarily bored, or just taking a pause, or having a fight with a companion.

I also look for solo diners. From my own experiences dining alone, I know that solo diners have a straightforward agenda: to treat themselves to a gift of quality, contemplative time, and to do so at our restaurant. I consider that the ultimate compliment, and I'm also hoping that today's solo diner will host tomorrow's party of four.

A little perception goes a long way. Hospitality can, in the right instance, involve little more than standing nearby and allowing my body language to smile at the guests. If I catch, say, a woman's eye, she may beckon me to the table and let me know that she needs water, a waiter, or the check. If I thank her for coming to the restaurant, she might say, "You're very welcome. This place is so much better than your other restaurants!" Or, "We were wondering when you opened this restaurant." Or, "It's nice to be back. It's gotten much better. Last time the service was so slow." Or, "We hadn't been back since you opened. It was so loud then! How *did* you fix that?"

In these exchanges I'm collecting information not just about who our guests are, but about how they feel about our product. One advantage a restaurant has over many other businesses is that we can get instant feedback while our consumers are consuming our product. People have an emotional attachment to food and to their money, and they come to our restaurants with high expectations. To the degree that they believe we are on their side, we usually don't have to work very hard to get candid reactions.

If our customers love what they've ordered, I can tell by looking at their faces (and their plates). If they aren't happy, they're going to let me or my staff know – as long as we've built the right relationship with them. One night in Blue Smoke, I noticed that some diners had finished eating but had left most of their onion rings untouched on the plate. They could simply have been full, but I went over to say hi and to have a closer look. Sure, enough, the rings didn't look crispy. "You didn't love them," I said, gesturing to the rings. "You know, you're right," the man answered. "They were the only thing I thought could have been better. I wish they'd been crispier and spicier." "Well, then," I said, "you're not paying for them." A moment later, as they got up to leave, the

man handed me a \$100 bill. “This is for the waiter,” he said. Good as this waiter was, I knew that the generous gratuity was in part a reflection of the fact that the guests appreciated our taking a special interest in them and caring for them. In the end, we decided to take the onion rings off the menu, because we couldn't get them consistently right without incurring a very high labor cost to produce them. That, of course, led to a spate of new complaints: “Bring back the onion rings!”

It had occurred to me in Woody Creek that until my fishing guide turned over that rock, I'd have been content to stand at the edge of the running stream enjoying the dreamy valley and mountains. But in business, turning over the rocks and reading the water, as a fly-fisherman might do, gives you crucial information so that you can take an even deeper interest in your customers, and encourages them to do the same with you.

Since I opened Union Square Cafe in 1985, guests who have dined with us there and in our other restaurants are presented with both a check and a comment card, an idea I had first seen while I was at Pesca. (There, guests were asked for their name and address, but feedback and comments were not solicited.) If guests write their name and address on the front of the card, we place them on the mailing list for our newsletter. That way, as promised on the comment card, we can “keep them informed of upcoming events,” such as our “morning market meetings,” “wine and food dinners,” and cooking classes. On the back of the card there's room for guests to share their opinions about the food, wine, ambience, service, and anything else on their minds – an ideal opportunity for us to collect dots. Early on, I responded personally to every comment card, but today that is the job of our chefs and managers, who read up to 100 cards a week. It's an excellent way to build trust, encourage and enrich dialogue, and give our guests the confidence that, at our restaurants, their suggestions are taken seriously.

It may seem obvious now, but in the 1980s using a comment card to compile a mailing list for a fine restaurant's newsletter was an innovation of sorts. You would rarely if ever see comment cards distributed in fine restaurants – that was more the domain of places like Denny's. But within two or three years I began to notice that the wording I chose for our first comment card – “We want you to return to Union Square Cafe and eagerly seek your comments or suggestions” – was being adopted almost word for word in all kinds of restaurants. Today, we have collected well over 150,000 names on our mailing lists. The lists have proved to be an extremely effective way to build a community and stay connected with our guests and friends all over the country – and even worldwide. Today, of course, the entire marketing profession is out to collect e-mail addresses to stay in touch with existing and prospective customers. We do that too, but in my judgment nothing can or will replace the meaningful contact that happens with a personal note or newsletter sent the old-fashioned way.

One of the oldest sayings in business is “The customer is always right.” I think that's become a bit outdated. I want to go on the offensive to create opportunities for our customers to feel that they are being heard even when they're *not* right. To do so, I always actively encourage them – when I'm on my rounds, in our comment cards, and in letters or e-mail to us – to let us know if they feel something's not right. When they do, I thank them.

Our telephone reservationists, who are our front line of offense in delivering hospitality, listen carefully and then input whatever data they receive from a caller into our Open Table reservation and “guest notes” database. (In the old days, we'd also gather information, but it was simply written in pencil on the reservation sheet for the day. That system made it unlikely that we'd ever

be able to retrieve the information again.) This information tells our hosts, maître d', managers, and servers a lot about a guest's needs, and helps us to customize our service and hospitality.

We also make sure to enter into “customer notes” any previous mistakes we made (“overcooked salmon on 7/16, spilled wine on purse 5/12”). We also indicate all special requests (“likes table 42; bring hot sauce with food; loves corner table; ice on side always with cocktails; allergic to shellfish; serve coffee *after* dessert”), which then show up on our computer reservation screen. As long as we make it clear that we're interested in knowing through active listening, most people are delighted to tell us exactly what they want or need.

When a reservation indicates that a guest is dining at one of our restaurants for the first time, we'll make sure the host knows. If we are to stand any chance of creating a new regular, it starts here. We'll need to win that trial round!

It's even possible to use the reservations sheets to begin the hospitality experience before anyone sets foot in the restaurant. One day I noticed on a reservation sheet that a couple would be coming in that evening to Gramercy Tavern to celebrate their twentieth anniversary – a big-deal night, for sure. That morning I picked up the phone to call them and thanked them for sharing the special occasion with us. “Bring a good appetite,” I said, “and enjoy your anniversary. “The woman on the other end of the line was happily surprised to hear from me, and said she was just about to confirm her reservation. “No need to call,” I said. “It’s taken care of.”

After we hung up, I confirmed the reservation at Gramercy Tavern and instructed the restaurant to send a complimentary midcourse to the couple that evening. Knowing it would be something delicious delivered by a wonderful waiter, I was confident we would create an evening worth talking about.

That is being proactive about offering hospitality, and it's what our managers do when they're performing at their best. Many businesses depend on word of mouth. People talk about where and how they celebrate anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays (“What did you do for your birthday? Where did he take you for Valentine's Day?”) and so those special occasions are especially rich opportunities to build word-of-mouth business.

Reviewing the reservation sheets that same morning, I learned that a regular guest was coming for dinner at Tabla, having visited three of our other restaurants over the previous two days. These included Jazz Standard, our music club downstairs from Blue Smoke, where this guest had enjoyed hearing the wonderful pianist Bill Charlap. It is absolutely critical to know such details. I called Tracy Wilson, our general manager at Tabla, and urged her to acknowledge how much we appreciated his loyalty.

Then I saw on another reservation sheet that a couple I knew who were coming in for dinner that night at Blue Smoke had indicated that they wanted to give their best regards to me. Why wait? I promptly picked up the telephone, called them, and left a message on their answering machine: “Hey, Helen and Paul, this is Danny Meyer. I noticed that you're coming to Blue Smoke tonight, and I just want to let you know how much your loyalty means. I won't be able to be at the restaurant to greet you personally, but I hope you're both well and that you'll enjoy Blue Smoke tonight.”

I realize that I don't have to do this kind of thing, but there is simply no point for me – or anyone on my staff – to work hard every day for the purpose of offering guests an average experience. I want to hear: “We love your restaurant, we adore the food, but your people are what we treasure most about being here.” That's the reaction that makes me most proud and tells me we're succeeding on all levels. I encourage each manager to take ten minutes a day to make three gestures that exceed expectations and take a special interest in our guests. That translates into 1000 such gestures every year, multiplied by over 100 outstanding managers throughout our restaurants. For any business owner, that can add up to a lot of repeat business.

In the late 1990s, when I first started hearing about Web-based electronic reservations books, I was very resistant to the whole notion. I thought that by taking online reservations, we would be losing the advantage we had always had with our warm, human telephone staff. We would be like every other restaurant.

Then I changed my view, for one reason: to close that window of access to people who preferred making their reservations online would be poor hospitality. It may be more convenient for them to reserve at eleven-thirty at night when they're sitting at their computers than during our regular business hours. It would let them check out the availability of a table without making a single call, without the frustration of a busy signal, without being put on hold – and without eventually being told that there's nothing available.

Once I finally accepted the inevitability of online reservations, I fell in love with the process and its benefits. Every time somebody makes a reservation on the Internet, that's one less telephone call for our reservationist to handle. As a result, the reservationist can more often avoid making the annoying request, “May I put you on hold while I take another call?”

The information we receive – whether a booking was made by telephone or on the Internet – is instantly added to the file of guests' preferences that we once recorded manually on reservation sheets or occasionally on file cards. Now, thanks to the vast record-keeping capacity of the computer, I can measure the degree to which guests are regulars. I can know what their favorite table is, or if they have a favorite (or least favorite) server. I can know when a guest's birthday or anniversary is. I can know if guests are regulars at our other restaurants – in which case I'm even more pleased to see them coming in to try another one of our restaurants for the first time. All this adds up to a gold mine of information, which allows us to connect all sorts of dots.

Online reservations also allow guests to make their own comments.

One guest, describing himself as a “super-Eleven Madison Park regular” and wine enthusiast, was making, by his own count, his 149th visit. If we see that guests qualify for VIP status for Open Table, meaning that they've made a huge number of online reservations at all sorts of other restaurants, we know that we're welcoming people who frequently dine out at other fine restaurants. That's a valuable opportunity to turn proven restaurant aficionados into our own regulars.

Occasionally, there are angry, demanding, or even abusive callers who do test our reservationists' patience. We have designed a shorthand system to give us a heads-up about a potentially difficult situation. It's another way we take a proactive, athletic approach to hospitality. If a reservationist has had to work especially hard to calm down or accommodate an irate caller, we may use the notation WFM (“welcome from manager”), which means that the guest may need some extra attention from a manager. When people let us know that they don't wish to be interrupted

unnecessarily, the notation is “do not disturb” or “drop and go” – that is, deliver the food and leave them alone. This note is passed on to the host and waitstaff. Our job is not to impose our own needs on our guests: it's to be aware of their needs and to deliver the goods accordingly. In hospitality, one size fits one!

When I spent my summer as a tour guide working for my dad in Italy, I reported to his manager in Rome, Giorgio Smaldone, a proud, chain-smoking native of Salerno who taught me a lot about the essence of hospitality. Giorgio's favorite expression about how to treat tour group members, delivered in his special form of English, was: *“There is to make them feel important. Always start with the one who most need feel important!”* Many years later, a wonderful server who had been at Union Square Cafe for more than a decade told me that when she had previously worked for Mary Kay Cosmetics, Mary Kay would teach the salespeople that everyone goes through life with an invisible sign hanging around his or her neck reading, “make me feel important.” Giorgio and Mary Kay had it right. The most successful people in any business that depends on human relationships are the ones who know about that invisible sign and have the vision to see how brightly it is flashing. And the true champions know best how to embrace the human being wearing the sign.

### **The Art of the Reservation (Benjamin)**

Setting your place at the table

In 2000, VETRI had been open for two years. We had enjoyed a wildly successful debut, with critics and customers alike embracing our innovative style of dining. Marc was serving regional Italian dishes like spit-roasted baby goat with soft polenta and sweetbread ravioli with braised veal sauce, and I was steadily growing our wine list. We were collecting accolades and regulars at a brisk clip.

Despite that early success, we still had a grand total of just eight employees, two of whom were Marc and me. In addition to the sexier responsibilities like creating an intriguing menu and curating an impressive wine collection, the two of us answered the phones and wrote reservations in a notebook daily. We spoke to every guest long before they sat at our table, and we knew the value of that interaction.

Before the technology revolution, excelling in a restaurant was all about a well-earned reputation on both sides of the kitchen door. We were always on our toes. I'd hear the phone ring and bound from the dining room to our office-at that time a closet in the basement- to answer the phone as if I'd been waiting all day for that call. If it rang more than three times, we considered it a failure. Forget about putting someone on hold to deal with another crisis. We didn't have a hold button! Since every call was so precious, we asked questions and took copious notes. "Have you been here before? Is there a special occasion? Do you have a table preference? Yes, we can accommodate you." That last line was always the most important. Before you'd sampled one bite of our food, or even seen a menu, you knew how we felt about you.

Today you just pick up your electronic device and make a reservation with a few clicks. You don't have to talk to anyone in order to secure your place at the table. Great, right?

Don't get me wrong: I love technology. I love efficiency even more. If I can cut down on the amount of time it takes to perform a task to our high standards, I'm all for it. And since our sole purpose is to provide guest service, if the guest wants the option to book a reservation online for the sake of convenience, then it's a service we know we should-and do-provide. Even if we did

enter the technology game kicking and screaming.

Back in 2000, a local rep for a brand -new website knocked on Vetri's door.

"Hi, I represent a company called Open Table. Our website was designed to help maximize your reservations and save labor dollars at the same time," Joe said, standing in the doorway.

As half of the team that personally took every reservation, I was skeptical of what Joe was peddling. As for the promise of saving labor dollars, I wasn't quite in that arena yet.

"Okay, tell me how it works," I said reluctantly.

"It's simple. Your restaurant buys a license to use our software, you upload your floor plan layout and menu, and you maintain regular access to our website. When a guest wants to make a reservation at Vetri, they go to opentable.com, type in Vetri, select an available time and they have a reservation. Best of all, you no longer have to pay a reservationist! You can build a database with notes about the guests, so next time they come you will know how many times they've been in, their food and drink preferences and any other info you want to add. It's a great tool. Everyone's going to be doing it!"

It's ironic that I didn't immediately jump on board, considering the conversation Marc and I had had just a month before Joe's visit. "Hey Jeff, I've been thinking," he said one morning while we were sitting at the desk we shared for eight years. "Maybe we should have a website or email account or something. What do you think?" "Hmm, isn't that expensive? How much does a website cost? Can't we just give our personal email accounts to people to contact us? "

"Yeah, but wouldn't it be cool if you could just logon and see our menu and stuff? Maybe even make reservations directly on the website?"

"I think it might be neat, but are people really going to websites to pick restaurants and make reservations?"

"I think they may at some point," Marc said. "I'm going to look into it."

Back to Joe from Open Table.

"When do I actually talk to the guest?" I asked him.

"When they arrive! You don't need to have any interaction with them at all. They get an email the day before as a reminder, and if they need to change the reservation they just go online and do it themselves. You never have to talk to the guest at all. It's beautiful!" "So let me get this straight. I'm in the business of guest interaction – I do what I do because I love people. I enjoy meeting them, I celebrate their differences and I take pleasure in bringing them joy. And now you're saying I don't have to interact with them?"

The look on my face told Joe he wouldn't be making a sale that day. "You see, there's a total disconnect between what you do and what I do. The way I see it, I get to talk to the guest. It's my privilege," I explained.

Then I thanked Joe and escorted him out.

Fortunately, he was persistent, and we continued to speak over the next few months. He was interested in hearing my perspective and eventually convinced me to come onboard by suggesting a unique angle on using the service: I could block all reservation slots on the site – effectively rendering the system useless for booking tables – while using the system to enter reservations we had taken ourselves, as well as guest notes. That last part was the part I loved, the tool that helped me learn more about my guests.



Over time, we realized it was essential to allow patrons in the digital age the opportunity to book online directly, and now full-service Internet reservations are available at our restaurants. I do admit this has maximized seating capacity and allowed us to more fully book less-desirable times. However, I have been cautious about how much labor cost Open Table saves us, if any, since we use online reservations as a tool to enhance the experience, not as a complete replacement for personal interaction.

Every guest who makes an online reservation at Vetri receives a phone call within the hour to confirm the date, welcome them and let them know how excited we are that they're coming. We have taken an otherwise impersonal internet tool and used it to make the guest interaction even more pronounced. It isn't feasible to do this in all of our restaurants, which record thousands of reservations a month. But whenever possible, if a guest has made a note or special request as part of their online reservation, we use that as a moment to start the interaction.

Now more than ever, it is imperative that we remember our values and principles and keep in mind why we do what we do. The minute you consider sacrificing integrity for a shortcut that fundamentally alters your business model, maybe the better solution is to do something else, or modify the shortcut to create something closer to your core. That personal level of service helps us not only get customers but also create regulars.

And while we're on the subject of the power of the telephone, on more than one occasion a simple phone call has led to a lifelong friendship.

One morning, years ago, Marc ran to the basement to answer the phone. "Hello, Vetri. How may I help you?"

The voice said, "I'm hoping to dine at your place tonight. Can you accommodate me?"

Back then, our weeknights were not very busy, but weekends were packed, and we did just two turns on Fridays and Saturdays. This particular call came on a Saturday.

"Sir, I wish we could," Marc replied, "but tonight we're fully committed. I'm happy to take your name and number and contact you if we have a cancellation. Or maybe you can come Monday?"

"Oh, no. I'm only here for one night. I was at DiBruno's this afternoon and asked if they supplied any restaurants who bought solely based on quality, not price. Without missing a beat they said, 'Vetri.' So I thought I'd give it a shot."

"I'm so sorry we'll miss you. Do you get to Philadelphia often? Maybe you can come in next time?"

"Two or three times a year, tops. I'm in from Iowa."

"My partner, Jeff, is from Iowa! How many people are you hoping to dine with tonight?"

"It's just me. I'm very flexible on time, and will even stand in the kitchen!"

"You will? Why don't you come in around eight-thirty, nine o'clock? You can hang out in the kitchen, and at some point we'll get you a table."

"That's great! I'll be there."

That night, the guy entered the restaurant with the biggest smile on his face and walked right up to me.

"You're Jeff?" he asked, then introduced himself. "I hear you're from Fairfield."

I soon found him a seat, and throughout the night we maintained an ongoing dialogue as if I was his de facto dining partner. We had a lot of things in common, and even our one major difference

– I'm a Cubs fan and he's for the Cardinals – produced an entertaining exchange that continues to this day.

Since that night, he's returned to Vetri every time he's visited Philly. He has attended my kids' birthday parties, shared family time with us and we even took a business trip to Italy when he opened a food-importing business. From one simple phone call, a lifelong friendship was forged.

Hey Joe, can a computer do that?

### **Creating Flow (Benjamin)**

"Running a restaurant is like trying to change the tires on a car you're driving"  
(*Mr. Gendler's wife says, "And now, try to be married to that person."*)

The next time you arrive at a restaurant with a group of five and a reservation for four and casually suggest that the server simply add another chair, please know that it really is not as simple as it looks.

This issue pops up frequently. The common "solution" offered by guests is to jam in another chair and place setting. I don't blame them for coming to this conclusion – we've all had family meals at home where the dining room table meant for ten suddenly needs to seat fifteen. You grab a few folding chairs from the basement and everyone crams together happily. The worst that can happen is an accidental elbow to somebody's ribs.

But in a restaurant, accommodating one guest can easily disrupt another. That's why we spend hours on the initial planning of a room, placing furniture and testing the flow. We actually have staff sit in all the chairs and banquettes at adjacent tables, then start moving around as guests do—getting in and out of the seats, leaning back, crossing and uncrossing their legs, sliding a few feet in each direction. It can get pretty comical, and it may sound like overkill, but this exercise actually provides valuable information. It's no surprise that lots of money is spent in the restaurant business to determine logistics that improve efficiency.

We can travel near and far to look for inspiration in design, colors, textures and everything else that goes into setting up a restaurant. We can go to Italy, eat in some great places and engage in fruitful conversations with families who have been serving food for centuries. We can come back and spend weeks searching for the perfect furniture and accessories to fill the room. But at the end of the day, every aesthetic choice has to meet a more important requirement: **efficiency**.

The restaurant business is a fast-paced, lively work environment. The only way it functions properly is if the staff, their tools and their surroundings are set up for maximum efficiency. My friend Jefferson Macklin, president of Barbara Lynch Gruppo restaurants in Boston, recently commented that running a restaurant is like trying to change the tires on a car you're driving, which perfectly illustrates the challenges of this business.

There's something special about restaurant designers that sets them apart from those who design other workspaces. The best restaurants combine function with aesthetics, and there are many elements to consider. The fact is, every item in the dining room – every chair, table, china cabinet, light and light switch – has been placed where it is for a reason. Nothing about it is simple. Changing one salient detail of a restaurant can negatively affect the flow of the whole

room, and all possibilities must be considered before one piece of furniture is placed. One busy night at Osteria Moorestown, our 120-seat suburban New Jersey restaurant serving Neapolitan and Roman-style pizza and wood-grilled entrees, a fairly large group showed up with a couple of extra guests. Only a few large tables were available, and none were ideal, but we had to accommodate the group. After a few minutes of deliberation, we decided to move the whole table a couple of feet to one side to create enough space for guests at adjacent tables to pass, then added a couple more seats and place settings to an already tight fit. Once things had been rearranged, everyone took their seats, hungry for a good meal.

Everyone, that is, except the guy on the end who ended up directly under a spotlight. This light had been carefully situated to illuminate the area next to the table and provide visibility for guests entering and exiting. But suddenly, it looked as if it had been placed by an interrogator to extract a confession from a prisoner. The server noticed that the poor guy would soon be sweating from the heat, and suggested that he go have a drink at the bar (on us) while someone got a small ladder and figured out a way to divert the light.

Speaking of light, the McDonald's corporation spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to determine that very bright lights and colorful plastic chairs would cause their guests to eat fast and leave fast, thus enabling them to turn their tables more quickly. Although we, too, invest significant time and energy on lighting – both in the planning stages and every night during service – our goal is much different. Like McDonald's, we need to turn our tables, but more than that we need you to be comfortable.

Have you ever noticed the light changing in a restaurant? You really shouldn't, even though we're constantly tinkering with it. Almost every light is equipped with a dimmer, and we spend time before service begins setting each one to its optimum output – bright enough to illuminate the menu and show you where you're going, but not so bright that you feel edgy. All night we monitor the light, and notice when the sun sets, especially in summer when we're well into our second turn before the light fades. Once in a great while, a staff member manning the dimmer will slide the switch too far and cause a jarring blast in someone's eyes. Like a lot of the things that we do in restaurants, guests never notice we're doing them until we mess up ever so slightly.

When it comes to efficiency, we notice everything, from table props like small vases and candles to bottle placement in the bar to equipment placement in the kitchen. While turning tables is crucial, it's just as important that guests never feel rushed. The best way to serve both needs is to tighten up efficiency in all areas.

The table props, for instance, are chosen not just for looks, but for ease of cleaning between courses and between turns. The bottles in the service bar are placed for quick access based on popularity. I've seen restaurant bars that are clearly set up for excitement but take forever to make a drink – and to me, waiting is not exciting.

Our kitchen, too, is arranged so that the most popular foods are prepared closest to the pass where servers pick up plates to be served. If we're serving a lot of pasta, then the boiler shouldn't be way over in a far corner. While these points may sound ridiculously minor taken individually, it's the compound effect we're going for. By paying attention to details that save us eight minutes per turn, we've just gained eight more minutes for every guest to enjoy, while also meeting our business goals.

In the restaurant business, we have to change, grow and stimulate ourselves and our guests. That's why, despite the time we spend getting everything just right, we regularly change the setup in every one of our restaurants.

By "regularly," I don't mean year after year on the first of January. Typically, change is initiated on the spur of the moment, when we're struck with an inspiration. Because that can happen when we least expect it, it's that much more exciting for us and, hopefully, for our guests. On the other hand, when we feel it's time for a change but the bright idea simply hasn't hit yet, we always have the option to take a vacation – I mean, a business trip – to Italy to seek a meeting with our muse.

### **Checking In (Benjamin)**

“We’re bit players in the evening’s performance. The guest is the star.”

When Albert Einstein conceived the theory of relativity, I wonder if it occurred to him in a restaurant while waiting for his water glass to be refilled. After all, each minute that passes while your water glass is empty seems like an eternity, right?

In the restaurant business, as a rule, **for every minute that passes the guest perceives it as five minutes**. If you take three minutes to fix a problem, they think it took closer to fifteen. Who wants their guests to sit in disappointment for fifteen minutes? It's a crazy concept, but we have to treat this warped perception of time as reality. So when a guest says they've been waiting for fifteen minutes, it serves no purpose to reply, "Well, it's actually been three minutes, but okay." The correct response is to acknowledge the concern and instantly resolve it – without the slightest hint that they may need a new watch battery.

One of our key training exercises gets right to the heart of the theory that time is relative. With the staff gathered in the dining room, I ask them to close their eyes and then raise their hand after five minutes have passed. After thirty years in this business, it no longer surprises me to see most hands go up within a minute or two. It also never surprises me to see the surprised looks on the faces of the time-challenged servers.

We teach this valuable lesson in the middle of systems training to highlight the importance of honing your internal clock while also calibrating it to jibe with the guests' perception of time. It's one thing to know the p's and q's of each system and to perfect them in a vacuum, but it's another thing to expertly apply them in the heat of the moment, all at the same time, in a loud room, among a number of people who expect to be served with precision and efficiency within a time frame that works for them. Not to mention with a smile.

Once you are seated, the server's goal is to minimize the amount of time spent away from your table so you will not be in need of anything for long. Not only do servers have to perform the balancing act of ensuring all of your needs are met, but they are performing the same act at the same time for four or five other tables. Great servers have honed their internal clocks to such a fine point that they can turn this cacophony into fluidity. They are acutely aware that when they serve drinks to Table One, the clock starts ticking and they've only got so many minutes until they should return. Meanwhile, thirty seconds have passed since they served the soup course to Table Two; a minute and a half has passed since they took food orders at Table Three; it's

coming up on three minutes since they've checked on Table Four; and the food orders placed for Table Five seven minutes ago will be up in the kitchen for pickup in a minute or two.

Time is a major expectation in any walk of life, but possibly more so in the restaurant business since we're dealing with food temperatures and the fact that no one will begin eating until each person at the table has been served. Likewise, there is an expectation of the amount of time that should elapse between courses. Have I been waiting ten minutes for a pasta I know takes four minutes to make? Conversely, did I wait just four minutes for a pasta that should have taken ten, and does this mean they are trying to rush me, or worse, was the food precooked? All of these things come into play in a guest's mind; it's our job to squelch such doubts before they come on.

You can imagine how many balls are in the air throughout the evening's elaborate juggling act. Adding one more ball to the mix is the fact that we need to make a living, and so, besides serving each guest within the time frame their needs dictate, we also have the responsibility of turning tables within the time frame that we established when we set the night's reservations. If we know there should be roughly ten minutes between courses, the server needs to discern when a table is eating a little slower or a little faster, and take action by shaving off or adding on a minute here or there. But we also need to remember that two minutes can seem interminably long or curiously short, depending on the guest. We can clear, reset and re-serve two tables within the exact same time frame, and yet hear two different reactions: "They just cleared our plates and already they are dropping the next course," or, "We finished the last course twenty minutes ago; where's our next plate?" And although Einstein may agree with both parties, in reality we know that to clear a table, reset the silverware, get the glassware ready and refill all glasses takes just about four minutes on anyone's clock.

Exactly how do servers learn the mental gymnastics required to twist time every which way in order to make it all come out at the same place in the end? Fortunately, at Vetri, most of the servers we hire already have service experience, whether they worked at a diner, a mid-casual chain or even in fine dining. Once they go through orientation and initial training, their basic skills are refined to work within our systems. But it doesn't stop there. We train staff continuously, regardless of the level they've attained.

One of the most effective training exercises we use is role-play. We'll have a few staff members sit at tables and direct them to act like specific types of guests – a family gathering, a corporate powwow, a romantic dinner for two. Meanwhile, a couple of other servers will wait on them in a real-time scenario. The "guests" will pull no punches in demanding this and that, while the servers will try their best to create lifelong regulars. Not only do the servers get to work on a variety of skills-including balancing time expectations – but the "guests" get to experience the systems and timing from the real guests' point of view; that alone is a valuable lesson.

For more personal training, I'll have a server walk beside me and observe every table as we traverse the dining room, and when we get to the kitchen, I'll start grilling them.

"How many people still had food on their plate at Table Six?

What course are they on at Seven? How many more minutes until the guests at Eight will be ready for the check?"

After a couple of decades in this business, I can briskly walk through a dining room and answer all those questions and more, about every table, at any time of the evening. And I expect all

servers to develop that skill. In fact, one point that we constantly drive home in training is that every server should look at every table – not just their assigned tables – all night long. (*You will hear me refer to this as “pivot-turn”, a phrase I learned from a past manager at my restaurant that was also a student from this program (Gendler).*) When this broad scope becomes a server's natural point of view, they are best prepared to step up and help each other whenever one needs a quick hand to get back on track.

I often hear colleagues say they get excited every single night when "the curtain goes up and the show starts." I understand what's meant by this common expression – like a theater, the room is quiet before the show begins and within an hour it's bustling with crazy energy. But I have mixed feelings about the line. On one hand, I don't believe that we're putting on a show, so to speak, although I do acknowledge the performance aspect of much of what we do. Instead, I compare what we do more to an orchestra, with movements perfectly directed by our maître d' or chef and carried out by individual servers who all come together to create a cohesive melody.

Even if we are considered performers, we are simply bit players. The guest is the star and needs to shine. As long as we understand our role and hit our marks, we will make beautiful music together.

### **Be Our Guest (Benjamin)**

Guest, “You have 135 seats right?”

Host, “Yes, we do”

Guest, “So how can you not seat eighteen at once?”

### **The Educator (Benjamin)**

“I see four empty tables. Why can't we just sit there? Or there?”

### **Don't Let Them Get Your Goat (Benjamin)**

“Sometimes a disgruntled customer just needs closure.”

### **Putting Systems in Place (Benjamin)**

“Yeah, we ran a little late. Sorry. And oh yeah, we are now six and not four”

“Kitchens and restaurants are chaos. And chefs are good at managing chaos.” -Jose Andres

### **At Your Service (Benjamin)**

“Of course there may be times you think you are going the extra mile, but in reality you're going a mile too far.”

### **Technophobia (Benjamin)**

“Put down the phone and pick up your fork.”

Most of the time, when food service is paused because a guest has gone outside to take a call, we'll make a note to clear and reset the table quicker in between courses. There are many other ways to get things back on track without the guests even noticing.

Other new technologies save us considerable time every night, compared to how we used to do

things. The POS system we use to input orders, track flow, gauge time lapses between courses, and much more is a far cry from its predecessor – paper and pencil. Open Table has also streamlined systems.

The iPad wine system used in all our restaurants is an incredible technological step forward, although I was slow to embrace it at first. The rep who sold it to us explained that every table can peruse our list on the iPad to be better prepared when we approach to take their order. This adds to the guest's experience by giving them more info about our cellar, while also cutting down on service time. But I stopped the salesman when he tried to sell me on the next step.

"The other great thing is that once the guest makes their choice, they just touch a button and their wine order goes directly to the POS. No fuss, no muss and your sommelier and server can focus on other duties."

No fucking way, I thought. But that's not what I said. Instead, I asked if that feature could be disabled – it could – and explained that while I love the idea of using the iPad as a tool to educate, **I never want it to replace the valuable interaction between staff and guest.**

The iPad offered another feature that I vetoed immediately: Our POS system, it turns out, includes a paging feature connected to the iPad that would allow guests to summon their server at any time, for any reason, at a touch of a button. Can you imagine? Night after night of our guests' unreasonable expectations dashed, followed by bitter, lingering disappointment. Who needs that?

We have worked hard to curate an extraordinary list, and our staff has a wealth of knowledge about it. Why would I want to deny guests the opportunity to take advantage of that knowledge? Often they arrive expecting to order a particular bottle but change their plans after a lively conversation with us. That is what I call an invaluable tool.

Our servers do a terrific job of fulfilling guests' needs swiftly, all night long. Each server works a minimum of five tables. What would make any guest think that paging a server would make them immediately stop what they were doing and come running on the spot? Let's be honest – that's exactly what most people would expect. Talk about a dangerous tool to put in the hands of every customer.

Still, we're hardly Luddites (*a member of any of the bands of English workers who destroyed machinery, especially in cotton and woolen mills, which they believed was threatening their jobs.*) At Pizzeria Vetri guests can download our app and add their name to the wait list, find out how long it will be and let us know when they're running late. Clearly someone who worked in the restaurant business invented this particular app. The only thing it doesn't do is allow you to order.

While I am relatively sure that cars will ultimately drive themselves, I can hardly begin to anticipate the kinds of changes our business will see in the near future. Maybe guests will be able to order on their way to the restaurant, choosing options for seasoning and cooking methods. Maybe someone will invent self-cleaning tables and a sub-floor conveyor system that moves plates, glasses and silver to the kitchen and in the deluxe model, cleans it all on the way like a car wash.

One thing I do know is that technology makes our world go faster and increases efficiency, while restaurants like ours exist to make you slow down, relax and savor a delicious, artful meal. At first, their union may seem counterintuitive, but when used in concert with each other, and allowing us to know our guests as well as ourselves, they can make beautiful music together at the table.

### **MOD (Manager of the Day) and Host Checklists**

**What does it mean to be fully prepared in each position?**

**What do you need (tools) and what do you need to do (with those tools)?**

*Items needed: Turn sheet, table diagram, reservation form/system, waitlist, paging system (balloons), POS programmed, Premeal notes and meeting, service stations stocked, positions filled, sections assigned, tables set, staff in uniform...etc. etc.*

### **Delegation**

*As a manager you are responsible for everything and rightly so, a new manager may feel like they must do everything. However, if you don't delegate (you may relegate yourself – do you know the difference?) you most likely will not be able to finish your job and you may be doing tasks that are not yours to do. New managers that have worked along side of their peers have an especially difficult time making the transition. Both the promoted person and the person that was “passed over” may have odd feelings during the giving and taking of “orders”. Remember, we are in this for the same reason. Remember the culture. We all have a seat on the bus. Are you still on the bus in your seat or not? If not, that is ok, leave and find a better bus with a better seat. Otherwise, get on and enjoy the ride in your correct seat at this time.*

**“Set for Success”**, (Cindy Schneider, General Manager/Owner San Chez Bistro)  
*Server/Server Assistance Checklists*

*Forecasting Scheduling - what effects these? Weather, events in the area, holidays, national events/news (911, election, protests, elections), skill of employee, type of restaurant, day-part, etc.*

### **The Staff (Benjamin)**

“The truth is we may appear like a raft of ducks gliding across the surface while in fact we are paddling like hell.”

### **Inside the Staff Meeting (Benjamin)**

“We're all in this together: So let's eat!”

All businesses have meetings, and the restaurant business is no exception. On the corporate level, we have our weekly profit-and-loss (P&L) meetings to discuss revenue and expenses, with the predictable goals of raising one while lowering the other. We also hold regular management meetings where the ownership group and managers of all our restaurants convene to address financials, staffing, best practices and more; we even reserve a portion of the meeting to discuss specific guests.



Finally, we have nightly staff meetings in each restaurant – the most interesting of them all – which lead into the traditional "family meal" that kicks off each night of service.

I often read business books for exposure to new ideas and angles for growing the Vetri Family. One recent title that made an impression is *Death by Meeting*, by Patrick Lencioni. As the title suggests, there's a widespread belief in the corporate world that an excessive number of meetings curbs production and adds no value. But the real take-away from that book is the notion that any meeting can be productive if it has direction and engages everyone in the room.

In our early days, meetings were more organic. We would realize we needed to figure something out, then quickly get together and just do it. As we've grown, we've had to make more effort to schedule meetings, but we try not to fall into the trap of having meetings for meetings' sake. We should all be smarter than that.

Our managers' meeting schedule is fairly regular, but the content – like the business itself – is so dynamic that it's almost impossible to set an agenda. We start off covering weekly financial performance, guest counts, cost containment and basic staff issues. But then it gets interesting. Each manager inevitably has something enlightening to say about certain guests who've visited in the last week, with the details offering insight for the other managers on how to replicate the good and avoid the bad.

Since I can't be in all of our restaurants all night every night, the managers' meeting is where I get to hear about the little things that worked – or didn't – so I can continuously shape our best practices as a group. One manager may say, "Hey, we tried this great happy hour special at Osteria that just killed. And it almost killed me, too! You know our happy hour goes from five to seven, right? Well, we ran out of arancini at 6:59! Close call, but very successful. Why don't you guys try it at your place next week?" Another might tell a cautionary tale. "For the last two weeks we tried to do scrapple at brunch and it did not go over well. So please, any of you who do brunch, don't do scrapple."

I love how productive and empowering these meetings can be, as each person is encouraged to jump in with comments, stories and suggestions. I could take notes beforehand and then address the group with all of this information myself. But running a meeting as a monologue, instead of the dialogues that typify ours, is the best way to lose your audience. Certain meetings do require me to do most of the talking, but at the end, like a baseball player after an out, I always throw it around the horn and let each person speak up. It's a no-holds-barred atmosphere and we get exactly the right kind – and right amount – of input. As much as everyone is encouraged to pipe up, they're equally encouraged to simply pass the mic if they've got nothing productive to add.

There's nothing more tedious than someone talking just for the sake of having talked. It's a waste of everyone's time and usually pretty transparent.

We do hold one meeting that you would be hard-pressed to find in any other industry – although it happens in every restaurant: the preshift meeting. By far it is the most important meeting at any restaurant, the equivalent of a sports team's pregame locker-room talk, packed with a detailed game plan and lots of energy and emotion. Before each shift, the manager gathers the entire service staff in the dining room, and often the back-of-house guys too, to talk about how the night will go and to elevate the energy level. It starts with getting key info on the table so

everyone's on the same page.

"Here are the specials for the evening. Here are the things we ran out of last night that we weren't able to replace for tonight; make sure you inform each guest up front. Here are some wines that we are long on that we should probably try to move, but only when it works. The bar staff came up with this awesome new cocktail we need to share. And here is a company-wide announcement that you should be aware of." And so on. This part of the meeting can be a bit preachy, but with good managers, it's usually over in a flash. I've attended preshift meetings where a general manager will drone on, "Here are your specials... These are the VIPs who are coming in tonight ... Here are the vegetables for the night ... Have a great service." Like your worst high-school chemistry teacher, this stuff just puts everyone to sleep. But with great managers, once the key info is imparted, things start to get interesting.

"Okay, here we go. If you didn't know already, Jessie's girl just had a baby!" Applause and laughter among the staff "He's not going to be in tonight, but we are so excited that Jill came in and is covering for him." High fives for Jill. "We got some really great VIPs coming tonight. David, you've got Charles Barkley around nine o'clock – make sure you save some energy for that!" David pretends to dunk a basketball and gets a chest-bump from the server next to him. "Now listen, this is really exciting...we've got eighty people coming in tonight who are first-time guests. You know what that means? Eighty future regulars! Let's wow them." Lots of looks around the room from one server to another, raising eyebrows and giving thumbs up – they're ready to make it happen. "Okay, so I just told you the specials that the kitchen has come up with; let's all have a taste so you'll know how to sell them." A tray comes out and in less than a minute the food disappears. "And hey, the big party at Table Six on the first turn, remember that those same guests were here last year on this same night for the same celebration. Let's make it extra special for them, okay?"

Then it's time to really break the ice. Unlike most businesses' staff meetings that feature all the same faces, the front of the house staff in a restaurant changes every single night. There are fourteen different shifts during the week, and since no one server works all of them, most shifts feature a different lineup. So from one night to the next, after we've gotten past the pertinent information, we like to build camaraderie and infuse energy in the hour just before we all get slammed. We'll play Trivial Pursuit or Jeopardy where all the answers and questions revolve around food in general or our restaurants and guests specifically. Sometimes we'll give out prizes – a piece of candy, or a gift certificate to one of our places or a colleague's restaurant. That's one way we get pumped up for service. Other nights we'll have a wine-tasting session with the sommelier or a quick beverage class, with each person getting a sip.

The pre-shift meeting will differ in its details, but it always delivers the same important message. "It's five o'clock, you're already enjoying yourself, so let's keep this vibe going until midnight. Let's go out there and kick some ass!"

All my friends in the business run their pre-shift meeting differently, but one common point is that it's always planned out. As loose as these meetings appear to be, they are always tightly woven beforehand.

One of the stars of the pre-shift meeting, in my experience, is Bobby Stuckey at Frasca in Boulder, Colorado.

"Pre-service is the building block that sets up every evening," Bobby told me. "It gives us a chance to put the focus on hospitality and each guest's experience. Our GM and I come in early every day and meditate on pre-service so we can prepare an inspiring forty-five-minute meeting. Without it, we wouldn't be able to work on the mistakes we made the night before, or improve on the great things we did."

One of Bobby's tricks to creating the most impact is to hold the staff meeting during the portion of the day when everyone is at their most relaxed – the staff dinner, also known as the family meal.

Family meal is a long-standing tradition in the restaurant business, the one meeting that sets our industry apart from others. Just before service every night, usually right after the instructional staff meeting, everyone sits down together to eat, laugh, talk about the night and replenish their energy for the craziness ahead. Staff meals usually consist of something on the menu that night or a dish created out of excess ingredients. Lest you think it's mere food for afterthought, remember, it's prepared by some of the best chefs in the city.

The real point of staff meal is that it's shared with family, albeit one's work family. Let's sit around the table and have a conversation. Let's talk about work, or about life. It's always special when we break bread with those we're close to, and food, the one thing none of us can live without, turns out to be the best team-builder of all.

### **Eight Things Servers Should Know (Benjamin)**

“Freshen up, don't pass the buck and learn where to draw the line”

#### **Dining excites all senses-smell included.**

Be aware of the aromas in the room; we should only be smelling food and wine. If you just took a smoke break, ate a pickle or are wearing perfume, you're affecting the guests' sense of smell. That's why the fresh flowers on our tables are either unscented or very lightly scented.

#### **Guests should be the only ones chewing.**

Sure, I espouse fresh breath, but chomping and snapping gum in front of a guest is just rude, and one of the surest ways to annoy me.

#### **Respect your colleagues.**

Most restaurant employees have basic respect for their coworkers, but what about the restaurant up the street? Never speak ill about your competitors. Who knows, you may work there some day. As long as we strive to be the best, there is plenty of room on the playing field.

#### **Taste is a personal preference.**

Just because you don't care for artichokes doesn't mean that your guest won't. Telling a guest you don't like it doesn't do much for anyone. Feel free to point out a dish you like better, but, "Ew, not for me!" isn't a great way to represent the chef

#### **Mistakes aren't habitual.**

Have you ever complained to a server only to hear, "Oh, that happens all the time"? What does that say about a restaurant? If it happens all the time and nobody has corrected it, it's probably a matter of time before the place is consistently empty. Sounds like a job for the expediter, not the

guest.

### **Don't leave a job undone.**

A partially cleared table indicates to a guest that we appear to be ready to bring their next course or turn their table, but we are preventing this from actually happening. It also tells a diner that they (a) eat too slowly and/or (b) eat too much. A table of four with just one person eating and three with an empty space in front of them is awkward for everyone. Wait till they're all done, and then clear. You wouldn't partially serve them, would you?

### **Friendly vs friend – know the difference.**

Know your guest and know their boundaries. Being friendly with every diner is encouraged, but making friends with all of them isn't going to happen. Pretending every guest is your best buddy is disingenuous at best and can lead to great discomfort.

### **Don't pass the buck.**

"Let me get your server" is a phrase that makes my skin crawl. You may as well say "I have absolutely no desire to help you because you aren't in my station and I don't get your tip." Give a little help whenever and wherever it's needed; you will have the favor returned, I assure you.

*And also you better read the Dos and Don'ts listed on Blackboard! (Gendler)*

### **Timing In The Dining Room (Eichelberger)**

Restaurants of every type need to have an idea about how long the average customer stays in order to stagger seatings to achieve a smooth flow in the dining room and kitchen. Whether or not they take reservations. They need to take into consideration many factors: the menu, the number of courses offered, the style of service, the type of client attracted (at lunch and at dinner, pre-theater or pre-movie crowd), the ambiance of the restaurant, and so on. How long does it take for a couple to dine? A larger group? One and a half hours? Two hours? Three hours? Dining time varies with the type of restaurant. Some primarily prix fixe restaurants like Alinea or Per Se rarely turn the tables since the meal often takes four hours.

Although it may sound somewhat counterintuitive, the dining room manager should not strive to fill the place up the minute the doors are opened. Although the full dining room may look great, service will be far from perfect because the entire staff is in the weeds – drinks take too long, bread never shows up, the servers are rushed, and the kitchen is physically incapable of sending out all of the food that was ordered in that initial fifteen-minute period. Some food will come out earlier than guests want, some later, making the diners unhappy. And there's a downside financially, as well – those guests who get their food late will therefore be leaving later, and longer stay times result in fewer table turns, which in turn means lower sales.

If the number of new tables is managed so that they are introduced every fifteen minutes (instead of all at once), the servers have time to get each table started, the bartender is working at a steady, busy rate, and the dinner orders are going into the kitchen in a nice, steady flow. The restaurant machine works more efficiently.

### **Turning Tables (Benjamin)**

“Restaurateurs are just realtors who serve food”

It's true, sort of. Instructors in college hospitality programs often refer to the restaurant business in terms of the real estate business. When viewed this way, a restaurant is one of the most expensive pieces of real estate around: Every seat can be sold twice each night. What a boon! On the other hand, the ability to sell each of those pieces of real estate expires at the end of each night, never to be sold again. What a bust.

That's why we stress the importance of turning tables. I use that phrase frequently throughout this book, and every night at work. Most restaurants will have two-and-a-half to three turns of the room on a typical night of service, and the goal is to turn each seat at each table.

When you look at the bottom line of the restaurant business, turning tables is the number-one factor that determines whether we thrive or merely survive. And if you don't do it enough, you go out of business. It's that simple.

I always say that one of the worst things a guest can do is to show up, very late for a reservation because it affects our ability to maximize the number of tables we turn. But it's much worse to not show up at all. That's like agreeing to buy a piece of property, having me take that property off the market permanently while there are still other potential buyers and then never showing up and paying up. When you book a 7 p.m. reservation and then don't show or call to cancel, my ability to sell that prime piece of real estate is gone forever. If you've ever wondered why we double-check your reservation to confirm your intention of keeping it, now you know.

I believe that if guests truly understood this, they wouldn't be so cavalier in their approach to reservations. To paraphrase Seinfeld, anyone can make a reservation, but the important thing is to keep the reservation. Too many people show up for their reservation at whatever time suits them, expect to be seated immediately and then sit for as long as they like, effectively preventing the restaurant from turning their table. It was worse back in the 1990s when it became fashionable to make reservations at multiple restaurants for the same time and then choose at the last minute, typically hanging the rest out to dry. Thankfully, that practice seems to have died out. A recurring problem that hasn't gone away is the guest who calls at the last minute and says, "Hi, um, our reservation is for right now, and it turns out we just couldn't make it. Can you just move our reservation to a different night? Tomorrow is not a problem for us."

Well, it is a problem for us, and it comes down to simple math. In a forty-seat room, that's eighty seats a night or 560 seats a week. So if we move your reservation for four to the next night, and something happens then, too, we're now down to 552 and counting – backwards. While hitting the number 560 is virtually impossible, turning tables efficiently gives us the best chance to come close.

The challenge from a hospitality standpoint is to never let guests know that in addition to creating a wonderful experience, we also have the responsibility to expedite that experience. There's an old expression regarding extended family visits: "Glad to see you come, glad to see you go." In our business, I would alter it slightly: "Glad to see you come, thrilled to see you leave happy."

So how do we turn your table without you knowing? It certainly does not entail walking up at a certain point and saying, "Time's up. You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here."

The fact is, we start turning your table the moment you're seated. We constantly monitor where each table is in the course of the meal, and whenever things get untracked – and they usually do – we are prepared to make adjustments. You missed your reservation by ten minutes? We'll make it up by clearing your table between each course in one minute rather than four. Needed some extra time to decide on apps and entrees? We'll take your dessert and coffee-service orders at the same time instead of separately. For all the obstacles a guest can throw at us, we've got solutions. One key to enacting solutions without you even knowing there is a problem is to do so casually and confidently.

Another key is teamwork. Each server is in constant contact with the host and expediter so they can work together to manipulate time on the fly. Let's say a table is struggling to decide what to eat and accepts the few extra minutes the server offers. When the server returns, it turns out they still hadn't looked at the menu due to the great conversation (hey, at least they're enjoying themselves). Third try, and only half the table is ready to fully order; but they're all ready to order appetizers and suggest that they'll order each new course after they finish the last.

That line is the kiss of death for a server; he knows the rest of their stay is going to be a hustle. But he also knows others have his back. He can't appropriately step up to the table to take entree orders while the guests are eating their first course, so the entrees won't be cooking in the meantime as they normally would. But let's say the server heard one of the guests mention the rib dish (which takes twenty-two minutes to fire) during the aborted entree order earlier. He may go to the expediter and say, "Table Five is ordering course by course, and I really think one of them is going to order the ribs." On a busy night, the expediter may take a calculated risk and have the cook start on an order of ribs.

When a table is on such a slow pace that running over time is inevitable, the server will alert the host so she can start working on solutions to seat upcoming reservations quickly at other tables, whether it's turning two deuces into a four top, or making a deuce and a four top out of a six. I encourage anybody to study the host at work on any given Saturday night at any restaurant. This careful manipulation of tables is truly an art form.

Nothing ever goes as planned, but we plan for that. One trick is that we do not seat the whole room at once to start the night. If you really wanted to sabotage a night's service, you would fill all 155 seats at 6:00 p.m. Not only would the servers fail to reach 90 percent of the guests within the requisite two minutes, but the kitchen couldn't possibly put out all 155 dinners at the exact same time, not to mention the next 155 after the turn.

So it always makes me chuckle when guests arrive to a half-full room and ask why I can't seat them just yet. I can only tell them to trust me; it's all part of the plan. When we seat tables in fifteen-minute increments, a few at a time, we are able to serve them much more efficiently and hospitably. It keeps the servers sane, it keeps the food hot and it keeps tables turning at just the right pace. It also makes your hour and fifteen minutes feel like just the right amount of time.

### **Tablecloth Notes:**

The hang should just be above the top of the chair's seat without touching it. Generally, this is about 12 inches.

If the tables are hard surfaced, a **silencer** should be used. This can be anything from a custom

sized foam pad, a second tablecloth, or simply some sort of soft cushioned pad or fabric stapled to the table. Obviously, this can make the top of the table unappealing to look at. It is for this reason, that the below method of changing a tablecloth is used. We do not want a “bare” table showing to the guests.

## **Changing A Tablecloth (Eichelberger)**

Without baring the table.



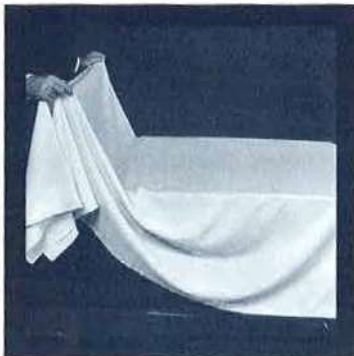
1. Position yourself at the table so you have seat #1 one to your left or right side. Hold a clean, folded tablecloth so that the thick rolled edges are on top (hems are on the bottom)



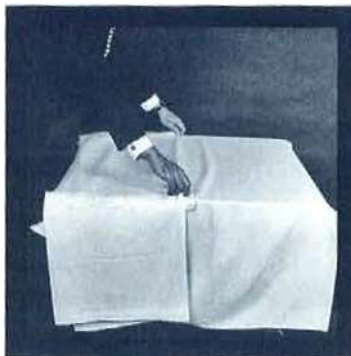
2. Pull the clean cloth open as you would an accordion.



3. Holding the clean cloth between your fourth and fifth fingers, reach down to pick up the corners of the soiled cloth between your thumb, index, and middle finger.



4. Pull the soiled cloth up and toward you until the far hem (of the soiled cloth) is at the edge of the table.



5. Now lower the partially open clean cloth onto the table. At this point, if the cloths were opened correctly, the hems of the fresh cloth should be on the bottom, center crease on top.



6. Grasp the top layer of cloth (the center crease) with your thumb and index finger; meanwhile, the next layer of cloth is held between your index finger and middle finger



7. Raise these two layers of clean cloth up and gently flick the bottom layer of the cloth so that it hangs over the far edge of the table. Rest the partially opened cloth on the table so that it covers about one third of the table.



8. Pinch the hem of the clean cloth and soiled cloth together. Pull back both cloths toward you.



9. When the center crease of the fresh cloth reaches the middle, release it and continue to pull the bottom cloth. The clean cloth should be in place - center crease pointing upward, hems rolled under, all sides hanging evenly. The soiled cloth should be in your hands.

## **Speaking of Gratuities (Benjamin)**

“Is that how little respect you have for the hospitality industry?”

One of the unique things about dining out in America is the gratuity at the end of the meal. In the rest of the world, service staff are paid a market-based salary or hourly wage, tipping is nonexistent or negligible and menu prices reflect this difference. In this country, there are no other transactions where your main contact's total compensation depends on your good will. Just think about that: How would you like your family's income to rely on other people abiding by the honor system?

I recently watched a cable news roundtable discussion about the future of the gratuity system in America. The panel featured four talking heads – none of whom were currently in the restaurant business – with two in favor of the status quo and two suggesting the tipping system should be done away with. The commentary ranged from surprising to enraging. But before I get to the details, you need to know the basics of the system if you don't already.

Most restaurants pay servers a below-minimum-wage hourly rate. This is legal because the government assumes servers earn most of their money in tips, and servers are bound to include them on their income tax returns. From the restaurant's standpoint, we save money on employee salaries and pass those savings on to guests in lower prices. Some restaurants do add an automatic gratuity, usually eighteen percent, for large groups of eight or more. Otherwise, guests have the option of adding a tip to their bill, and the majority do so. The loose standard is 20 percent, though some always give a little more, others a little less and some use a sliding percentage based on the level of service they feel they've received. Then there are those who decide to tip nothing – or worse, next to nothing – for various trumped-up reasons.

"You know, we had to wait fifteen minutes for a table. It's too bad, but that will affect the tip."

"The wine was so expensive, let's just take it off the tip."

"The food could have been hotter. We'll show them. No tip."

"Sixteen bucks for tax? Screw that, we're taking it out of the tip."

Notice one commonality between those reasons? The server had nothing to do with it. And ironically, it's the people who stiff servers on their tip who usually make the servers work the hardest.

Tip distribution among staff varies from one restaurant to the next, but usually falls into one of two categories. In most places, each server keeps the tips left on their own tables, cutting out a small percent – chosen by them – for bussers and food runners. In many mid-casual to fine dining locations, tips are pooled and distributed with equal shares for servers, plus lesser equal shares for bussers and runners.

When we first opened Vetri, since it was only eight tables and the entire front of house staff (all three of them) worked the entire room, they just shared all tips. As the Vetri Family expanded to seven locations – each of them with more employees and tables than the first – we kept the tip pooling method in place. For one, it was what we knew. But there were also more practical reasons.

It's easier for management to encourage teamwork when every table is the responsibility of every server. It was also clear to every server that luck of the draw was too random to make a non-



pooling system work. On any given night, one server could get several six-tops of business people ordering magnums of wine and tipping large amounts, while another would get some deuces and a few family four tops with nondrinkers. Both would serve their tables equally well, but one would earn far less in tips for the same amount of work. Since the latter could happen to every server on any given night, there was a consensus to just share.

A professional staff doesn't need an incentive either way. They help each other out when necessary because they understand that when one is successful, we're all successful. There are also plenty of occasions where someone on staff who never shares in the tipping pool-like the host, manager and sommelier – directly serves a table because their input is needed in the heat of the moment, and their motivation is still the same.

Tip pooling ensures consistency, too. If a server waited on a guest one night and provided phenomenal service, when that guest returns, odds are they will not have the same server but they will still have the same expectation of service. I can confidently say that most of my colleagues who use the tip pooling system provide this consistency as well.

While tipping in general is not often discussed in the industry, a national debate on minimum wage has gotten the non-restaurant world talking about it all. I suppose it's always a good thing to see the restaurant industry in the news, but I would have been better off missing that cable news roundtable discussion.

The first gentleman who spoke, an attorney, was adamant that the status quo is the only system that will work. His opinion is not necessarily wrong, but his reasoning was brutal.

"If I'm at a restaurant and the gratuity is included, then I know for certain the staff has no incentive to work very hard. I waited tables in college" – which, of course, makes him an expert – "and know that on nights when I busted my hump I made more money. Simple as that. If I got paid the same amount no matter what, then why should I work any harder?"

Huh? Is that how little respect you have for the hospitality industry? Or maybe it shows how much respect you have for your own job. If I'd been on the panel, I would have asked this so-called expert, "So, if I engage you for your services and you charge me a flat fee, does that mean I get your minimum effort?"

I wasn't any more impressed by the duo who argued that we ought to abandon tipping and pay servers like any other job. Their opinion is also not necessarily wrong, but again, the reasoning was idiotic.

"Restaurant workers all live paycheck to paycheck and their bosses are just raking in money because they don't pay anybody. The owners shouldn't rely on their customers to pay their staff" Talk about taking the dignity out of what we do, not to mention having a clear misunderstanding of business. Restaurant P&Ls are modeled on the assumption that servers earn most of their income via tips. If the model changed, restaurants would simply adjust the budget to ensure that we paid all our expenses and still – wait for it – made a profit.

Let's say we did abandon the tipping model. I would simply raise our prices by the tipping standard of twenty percent, maintain the rate at which my front of house staff gets paid and create a neutral effect (with the exception of sales tax) on what my guests spend. A \$24 dish would now be close to \$29, but the tip removed would be almost \$5. So the system can be shifted with very little effect on owners, servers or guests.

None of the points by either side added any worthwhile insight.

But all the panelists delivered the same regrettable message that there still exists this subtle but pervasive condescension toward the American hospitality industry – and that's the thing that has to change!

The tipping system has been around forever and I don't get involved in the politics of it. I will simply implement any policy that benefits all involved and that the government deems legal. Tipping, nontipping, to me they're the same – I honestly don't know which system is better. But I do know this: In the past year alone, the Vetri Family has seen five babies born into the fold, three weddings and six home purchases – all the fruits of hard work by dedicated professionals. The restaurant industry is a noble one and provides great opportunity, whether you're in it for the dynamic environment, to get on track to a management career or you aspire to ownership one day. No matter where they are or where they're going, every server deserves the same respect as a professional in any other industry.

### **Comment Cards (Benjamin)**

“Online feedback and playing the Yelp card”

One of my favorite stories from my pre-Vetri days is kind of bittersweet. Bitter because a guy lost his job, which is never good. Sweet because it confirms a valuable lesson for any business owner, and also, I suppose, because I got the guy's job.

The position was manager of a dining room. I was told that my predecessor was relieved of his duties for nonperformance, whatever that meant. It didn't take long to figure out. First day on the job, I set my briefcase down, started placing office supplies in my new desk and in the bottom drawer found thousands of comment cards. It was clear that none had ever been read, for they were as crisp as the day they'd been bound by rubber bands and tossed into the drawer. My first thought was, "Gee, if that last guy had only bothered to look through these, maybe he could have saved his job – and improved the experience of the guests."

I started to thumb through the cards. They covered everything from "food's too salty" to "long time between courses," plus a handful of positive reviews. Some cards included the guest's address, as if they hoped to receive a response, which clearly never happened. I started sorting out cards that fit a trend and soon realized a couple of dishes had received the same criticism multiple times, and one particular server had been called out for his bad performance by several guests. I checked the employee chart and saw that the server was still on staff. I noticed names of servers whose performance had often been praised; none of them were on the chart. I approached the assistant manager.

"What's the process for comment cards?" I asked.

"The guests get them inside the check presenter at the end of their meal, and if they fill them out, their server gives their cards to the manager."

“And then what happens?”

"Well, I really don't know. I suppose the manager would put them in a file or something."

I shook my head. "Well, did he or anyone else respond to the comments? Some guests took the time to write down their address."

"I wouldn't know," he said. "I've never read any of them and the previous manager never really talked about them. Why do you ask?"

"Have you heard of these servers?" I asked and named the ones whose reviews were all positive. "Oh yes – great servers. They're no longer with us, though."  
"I noticed that. Why'd they leave?"

He didn't know. But I thought I did. They had probably been disheartened by lack of response to comments about bad dishes and bad servers, figured the unchecked negativity would affect them and decided to seek employment at another restaurant where management actually nurtured guests, staff and the back of the house.

I also knew I'd have to have a talk with the server still on staff whose name kept coming up in a negative light.

If you solicit guest comments, you have to act on them. It's frustrating to see a restaurant with the tools to succeed that just doesn't use them. It's hard enough to be successful when you don't have an advantage. One of the greatest tools in the restaurant business is guest feedback, and when it's given in a constructive manner and used to make productive tweaks, it's amazing how much success you can generate without spending a dime on marketing.

Criticism is not a bad thing. We encourage guest feedback and often initiate the process. Many nights after service I will go to Open Table and look through the guests who'd just been in. Often I'll send out six or seven emails to thank them for their visits and ask for specific feedback in return. We also receive unsolicited emails from guests who've eaten at our seven restaurants. Thankfully, very few are negative, but when they are, either Marc or I will reply directly, and always within twenty-four hours.

As far as actual comment cards go, we've replaced those in our restaurants with a more direct approach – soliciting feedback from our guests immediately after their meal by the host staff as they approach the door. On the rare occasion, a guest will stop and say, "Well, since you asked..." and add a complaint or opinion. Whatever the nature of it, the host will immediately call a manager over. The majority of the time the answer is very positive, probably for one of three reasons.

First, I'm confident that our staff was able to recognize any misstep on the spot and quickly turn it into a positive, and by the end of the meal the misstep is long forgotten, replaced by positive feelings. The second reason is that we generally do get it right every step of the way, and our guests are actually happy when we say goodbye. The third thing is that many guests don't like to be bothered, nor do they like to bother us; if they did have a small complaint or concern, they may just keep it to themselves and say to us, "Everything was great" and not really mean it. I imagine their attitude is, "What do they care? They already have my money so I just won't come back," or, "They won't do anything about it anyway, so why bother?"

For Vetri restaurants as well as most of our colleagues', those preconceptions are simply untrue. Without feedback, we're left wondering, "Whatever happened to that guest who used to come in regularly?" Or "Hmmm ... those people started off happy, but when they left, they didn't seem so thrilled. They just said, 'Good,' and left. I'm starting to think it might not have been so good for them ..." By the time we realize that something was wrong, it may have happened again and again, and before we know it we have a trend. Once the horse is out of the barn, it's hard to coax him back in.

Better to close the door early. And to do so, we need to hear every problem and opinion. One area of feedback I'd rather do without is online reviews and comments especially the anonymous variety. My problem is that they are unproductive and often seem to have an ulterior motive. Any comment that doesn't give us a chance to fix the perceived infraction is pretty useless. But I suspect that venting is all these people want to accomplish anyway. I'm not sure what the proliferation of online complaint boards says about our society, but it can't be positive. Another way to garner feedback, which we haven't used yet but have considered, is going to the pros. Some of our colleagues use secret shoppers who come in with an agenda and gather useful information. The idea is that their agents arrive at the restaurant in the guise of regular guests, experience the meal as anyone would and then prepare a report for management. The shopper is given a list of standards and steps of service employed by that restaurant, such as:

1. Were you seated on time?
2. How long did you wait to be greeted?
3. Did you get what you ordered?
4. Hot food hot, cold food cold?
5. Knowledge of the staff?
6. Cleanliness of the restaurant?

Actual questions are more personalized than these samples, and colleagues have told me the info gleaned is invaluable. We've never taken this step at Vetri because we have always run our restaurants with a very close eye and hands-on presence. My partners and I visit each of them most nights, seeing and hearing for ourselves. Our management team has been in place for a very long time; not only are they our eyes and ears but they've also helped develop our standards and are therefore the best to monitor them. I believe we have the best service staff around. We've created a culture of completely open communication – the only way to success – and our staff have all bought in. They don't hesitate to discuss negative situations – even those they may have caused. On any given night, I may walk into one of our restaurants, have a server notice me and call me over.

"Hey Jeff, I'm trying but I can't seem to connect with Table Twelve. I don't think they like the table, but we're full and I can't move them. Do you think you could talk to them?"

"Of course – thanks for telling me."

They also regale me with the positives, like, "Jeff, Table Sixty-Two was asking for you," or, "I waited on Seven at a previous restaurant and remembered that they love Barolo, so I suggested the new one you just got. Total home run!"

It's all a collaboration, but the most important link in the chain is feedback from the guests.

### **“Logbooks” – Now Google Docs!**

It is always a good idea to track your business with complete documentation done by several positions every day. This is especially helpful if you are not in the establishment every hour of every day. It is

There are four “logbooks” that I recommend keeping on a daily basis. Over the past 25 years I had collected 100 annual logbook diaries outlining every day of operations from four different perspectives. The highlights of these books and the learning opportunities they would bring forward would be reviewed weekly by the management team within their meeting. Any issues were looked at from a systems approach to see if we could change and improve anything to make

sure the issue never reoccurred.

Twenty-five years ago a log book was a physical annual Diary with a specific dated page for every day of the year. Today a “Logbook” could be set up in Google Docs and permissions can be given to the individuals that are allowed to post within the specific areas. This way a general manager can be anywhere and read about the business and any issues needing attention.

The four areas that are recommended are Host, Bartender, Chef, and Dining Room Manager. There should be an entry from each of these areas from each of the shifts. If your establishment is open for two meals per day, then there would be two entries per day. Standardized comment areas should be established. For instance, at the host stand, you may want to specify that any events in the area or special events at the restaurant are mentioned. This will not only help you understand fluctuations in business but force the hosts to be cognizant about what may affect their shift and help them plan ahead and communicate to the servers regarding seating. Other items that should be documented are any complaints, issues, weather, covers, wait times, etc. On the chef’s log should be 86 items, prep issues, seasonality or pricing issues, equipment maintenance issues, recipe concerns, staffing, etc. Bartenders must document their sales, service concerns, any “cut-offs” that had to be performed, etc. And the dining room manager’s documentation should be a comprehensive outline of the entire flow of the evening including much of the above and especially any complaints and how they were remedied.

## Section 3

### Designing for Dining (Benjamin)

“A Philadelphia brownstone with soul.”

A few years ago, tapas restaurants were all the rage. The combination of flavorful Spanish dishes on small plates designed for sharing with friends was something that Marc and I both really enjoyed. So we talked about opening a tapas place. The conversation lasted just a few minutes. Ultimately, we admitted what we already knew – that you really can't sit around a table and say, "Hey, let's open a restaurant; what kind should we do? How about tapas?" It would be obvious to most diners that you weren't in it for the right reason, and the lack of authenticity would be painfully apparent. There would be no soul. It may sound a bit esoteric, but it's the truth – a restaurant needs to have soul. Without it, the result is almost certainly soulless food and service.

In the process of opening Vetri, Marc wore his soul on his sleeve. He approached all facets of concept, design and construction with intense attention to detail, and every decision was touched by a particular inspiration. He constantly referenced foods, colors, styles and accessories from his time spent in northern Italy, and although I'd never been at that point, his excitement became my excitement.

The chosen space – a brownstone in the middle of a residential block – had been home to successful restaurants in the past, including Philadelphia's famed Le Bec-Fin. Setting up shop in this particular room was very important to Marc, not so much for practical reasons like location or floor plan, but because it was hallowed ground. It had heart; it had soul.

He spent a great deal of time choosing paint colors. That same love went into picking out linens, chairs, plates, glasses, lighting and – even though we were on a shoestring budget at the time – properly weighty flatware. My years in the executive dining rooms of Wall Street's biggest banks had given me some valuable perspective in these areas, ensuring that Marc's vision worked within the standards of fine dining as well as our budget. When making these choices, in addition to form and function you have to factor in breakage and theft. You can't afford place settings for thirty-five unless you can afford them for three times that number.

Looking through catalogs and showrooms wasn't all we did; we also got down and dirty in the renovation. Marc and I spent the better part of a week on our hands and knees stripping and staining the old hardwood floors, doing our best to match the colors and textures that he recalled from a couple of places in Italy that he admired.

"Wow," I remember thinking. "I left a high-paying corporate job to open a restaurant with this guy who frankly is a bit obsessed. I haven't earned a dollar in over a month and I'm staining floors on my hands and knees trying to match a color from some restaurant in a village in northern Italy."

Still, I couldn't have been happier. I knew the day would come when I'd be walking those floors with a room full of our own guests, welcoming them with pride into the space that we created to enjoy an experience that they simply could not have anywhere else.

Soon after we opened, Marc said to me, "You know, to really understand what it is I want to do with Vetri, you've got to come with me to Italy."

Who'd say no? We hopped on a plane and started making the rounds of Marc's old haunts. The moment I walked into the first restaurant, it all clicked. The color on the wall was the color on the wall of our restaurant! The next restaurant had menus and furnishings that looked like ours. Another place was playing the music that we play, and there were dishes everywhere that were reminiscent of our own. I realized then that what Marc wanted to do with Vetri – in fact, what he had done – was to bring to Philadelphia the passion he had experienced in Lombardia. No amount of market research can duplicate that kind of inspiration.

Of course, once you have your concept down, you have to get into the details. That's the fun part. You stand in the space, walk around the space, get a feel for the space.

'What if we did this over here? And what if we did that over there? How will it feel to guests?'

To complement the rich wood tones of the floor, chairs and cabinetry, Marc hired a young (i.e., inexpensive) art student to paint a mural on the wall across from the entrance. And because every dining room needs a focal point, Marc had the inspiration to place a beautiful antique Berkel meat slicer adjacent to the mural. Its addition actually cost the room a couple of seats in terms of space, but in the long run, getting the atmosphere right will contribute more to your success than adding to the head count. The imposing red slicer created a memorable visual moment for each guest who entered, and it became such an important element to the room that we added a Berkel slicer to all of our restaurants.

Years after we opened Vetri, Marc visited the Murano glass factory near Venice. He fell in love with a chandelier and ordered one on the spot, calling me from his hotel to advise me not to put anything on our credit card for a while. It was probably the biggest impulse buy I've ever seen, but it's been well worth it. The chandelier has become the focal point of the room and adds such warmth and elegance that when we finally opened our upstairs dining room at Vetri in 2014, Marc ordered another Murano chandelier.

Of course, not every restaurant needs an expensive chandelier to deliver the desired look and feel. When we started conceiving our gastropub, Alla Spina (Italian for "on tap"), we obviously needed to create an altogether different feel from Vetri, yet no less authentic.

The craft beer scene was already thriving in America when we noticed it taking off in Italy during our frequent visits. The concept hit both of us at the same time; it was an easy, natural decision to open an Italian gastropub. The challenge was to create an environment that blended the popular American scene with influences from Italy.

Once again, Marc and I hit the road. After traveling thousands of miles to gastropubs from Italy to New York City and beyond, we were ready. Since Alla Spina is in an old car dealership in Center City, we knew we wanted the design to honor that history and energy. The choices of poured cement floors and twisted aluminum walls came naturally, but the real inspiration was hiring a graffiti artist to cover the walls with high-impact urban art. All the design elements combined to create a casual, exciting atmosphere. The look of the room captured the Philly part of the equation, but our fact-finding mission had as much to do with the food as it did the design.

We hired an accomplished chef with great beer-scene credentials to run the kitchen. And while we spent a lot of time devising a menu with just the right beer-friendly dishes, like mortadella hot dogs with cabbage relish and fried snails in parsleyed tartar sauce, it seemed we spent a crazy amount of time perfecting the French fries. In this scene, a place is only as good as its fries. We

experimented with cutting methods, heat levels, cooking times and even resting times. Skin on or skin off? Should we serve the fries right out of the fryer, or let them sit out a couple of minutes? How often should we change the oil? Each of these questions resulted in numerous experiments until we honed the recipe. Now the beef-fat fries at Alla Spina are legendary.

Of course, there really is no final form to any restaurant concept and design. In fact, that original Berkel slicer that inspired us to place one in all of our restaurants is no longer on display at Vetri. Like everything else, restaurants need to change and grow, even if it means retiring the focal point that guests have grown comfortable with. The beauty is that these changes don't happen on any kind of schedule, but rather by feel. And when inspiration hits, it's always wise to follow.

### **A Tour of Tabletop Options**

There are many things to consider when deciding just what you want your guests to see and use on the dining room table. Some items will be preset, some will come and go throughout the meal. All of these items comprise the Tabletop items.

The Chef of the establishment must be involved in the selection of tabletop due to the enormous effect the selections can have on food cost, presentation, and profitability.

Important things to consider when selecting tabletop items include:

- The establishment's resource for procuring.
- The cost of the items.
- The material it is made from (China, glass, metal, melamine, etc.)
- Durability/replacement costs.
- Portion control.
- Cross utilization.
- Dishwasher training and racking.
- Weight, stackability, stability on a tray (servers need to carry the stuff).
- Disposable/to-go possibilities.
- Environment, sustainability, country of origin.
- Stock item or special order - Delivery time.
- Theft
- Color and design to reflect theme or show off the food.

The main categories and things to consider regarding Tabletop items are laid out nicely on the Gordon Food Service handout you received from Jean VanHorn at the Gabriel Group showroom tour. These are:

## **Gordon**

FOOD SERVICE

### **Basic Terms to Know**

#### **Shapes, Dinnerware**

- Narrow Rim; a plate that features a rim  $\frac{3}{4}$ " wide or less.
- Rolled Edge/Wide Rim; a plate that features a rim  $1\frac{1}{2}$ " to 2" wide.
- Coupe; a plate without a rim, it tapers up.
- Scalloped; a wide rim plate with a wavy edge.
- Square and rectangle.

#### **Decoration, Dinnerware**



- Pattern; a term used to identify the color design of dinnerware.
- Emboss; a raised texture design, usually on rim of plate.

### **Piece Identification, Dinnerware**

- Grapefruit Bowl; a narrow rim soup bowl, also used for cereal.
- Nappy Bowl; a non-rimmed soup bowl.
- Fruit Dish/Monkey Dish; a narrow rimmed small bowl.
- Bouillon; a cup shaped bowl for soup and broth.
- Rim Deep Soup Bowl; a rolled edge flat profile soup bowl.
- Pasta Bowl; oversize capacity flat profile bowl.
- Great Plate; an oval platter with a round foot.
- Platter; an oval shaped platter with an oval foot.
- B&B Plate; a small round plate 5.5" to 7.5" diameter for bread and butter.
- Service Plate/Charger; a 12" decorative plate customized (usually with logo)

### **Dinnerware Accessories**

- Rarebit ; oval in shape, often referred to as a boat, usually ovenable
- Shirred Egg ; round bowl with side handles, usually ovenable
- Fry Pan Server; server shaped like a fry pan.
- Sizzle Plate; a metal plate with underliner used to serve steaks and sometimes fajitas

### **Drinkware**

- Champagne; used for champagne or sparkling wines, can be flute, trumpet or saucer shaped.
- Cocktail/Martini ; V-shaped used for martinis and manhattans
- Mixing/Pint; used for colas, water, iced tea, etc.
- Rocks; used for on-the-rocks such as whiskey, scotch, martinis, and manhattans.
- Cordial; used for cordials, liqueurs, and other sweet drinks.
- Shot; 1 to 2.5 oz. capacity glass that's used for specific measures of alcohol.
- Pilsner: used for beers, ales, and stouts.
- Red Wine; used for red wines, the round bowl shape allows itself to capture the full bouquet of red wines.
- White Wine; used for white wines, the bowl is taller and narrower.
- All-purpose wine; bowl is shaped between red and white wine to use for both.
- Tumbler; footless glass commonly used for water, beer, and sodas.
- Goblet; stemware with a large bowl, often used as a water glass.
- Carafe/Decanter; usually ½ or 1 liter, to serve wine or sometimes water and juice.

### **Flatware**

- Silver-plate; highest grade flatware, plated with silver, used in country clubs, upscale restaurants, hotels.
- 18/10 is 18% chrome, 10% nickel. 18/8 is 18% chrome, 8% nickel. 18 chrome is economical 18% chrome.
- Basic 5-piece place setting; dinner knife, dinner fork, salad fork, teaspoon, soup spoon.
- European Size; dinner fork is larger than traditional fork, teaspoon is smaller.
- Bouillon/Oval Bowl Spoon; bouillon is traditional round shape bowl, oval bowl is oval shaped (like an oversize teaspoon).
- Oyster/Cocktail fork; small 2-3 tine fork used for shrimp cocktail, crab, etc.
- Butter Spreader/Butter Knife; spreader has a more rounded end for easier spreading, butter knife has a sharper point for cutting butter.
- Hollow Handle/Solid Handle Knife; hollow handle is more balanced, solid handle more economical.

## **Styles of Service (Eichelberger)**

Before describing the various forms of service, a little clarification may be helpful. Serving to a classically trained server means transferring food with utensils from one surface to another, for example serving food from a platter to a plate as in Russian service (as shown at right). *Setting-in* means to set a plate in front of the guest (onto which food will be served from a platter, or upon which the food has already been arranged). It has become commonplace to call setting a plate of food in front of someone "serving." For the purposes of explaining the reasoning behind the procedures of different styles of service, *setting-in* and *serving* will be used in the classical sense in this chapter. For example:



Serving food onto a preset plate should be done from the guest's left as in Russian service. If following French service and setting-in preplated food, this should be from the guest's right. To provide more fluid service and avoid having to back up, the server moves around the table counterclockwise when serving from the guest's left, and when setting-in from the right, the server moves clockwise around the table.

## **French Service (Eichelberger)**

Based upon the banquet styles of the sixteenth century, service *à la française* is the most elaborate and labor intensive of all serving styles. Traditionally, French service at small banquets in large private homes divided a meal into three separate courses, with much of the food cooked or finished tableside, from a rolling cart or *gueridon*, in the dining room. (Tableside cooking first began in Russia and was then further developed into a flourishing service style in France. Consequently, there has been confusion over the correct use of the terms French or Russian as a descriptor for this style of service, especially since tableside service equipment is referred to by its French name.)

As guests entered the dining room, the first course was already set up (the origin of the word *entree* for the first course can be traced to this "entering" of the dining room). Hot items were brought to the dining room on silver platters and placed on the *gueridon*, or covered warmer. After the guests finished a service, they got up and left the table while it was cleaned and reset for the next service. This second service (course) was the *relevé* or *remove*. The first two services consisted of between ten and forty items, including soups, game, and roasts. Many of these items were placed on the table on platters with serving utensils for what might be referred to as family-style service today. The third service, the *entremets*, included a variety of desserts, savorys, puddings, fruits, and nuts.

Today's formal service generally requires a brigade of service personnel (jobs to be discussed later) dressed in the traditional white gloves, bow tie, and apron. This courtly style of service can be entertaining for guests, but it has some distinct drawbacks in today's more cost-conscious (and less decorous) era. For one, the additional costs of equipment, staff and space required to serve tableside is prohibitively expensive for most establishments.

### **The Gueridon (Eichelberger)**

In formal service, the gueridon is center stage in the service act. It is often equipped with a réchaud (heating element) and a large silver dome or cloche for covering food. The gueridon should contain all the tools and equipment needed for the menu items. It might be used for mixing salads, deboning fish, or carving meat. The fuel is usually alcohol, bottled butane, or Sterno. Gueridon service is very similar to formal service, except that all items are fully prepared tableside from the gueridon and immediately plated and served. Some fine dining establishments employ a modified form of formal service in which food is fully or partially cooked in the kitchen, placed on a platter, and carried to the dining room by the server. The platter is then placed on the gueridon or heating table and plated. This allows some tableside showmanship with less labor for the server. One example of tableside service you may see in some establishments is the preparation of a cheese plate.

### **Voiture And Trolley Service (Eichelberger)**

The meaning of *voiture* loses something in translation. Literally, “a carriage or car” a voiture is generally a decorative cart, also known as a “trolley” equipped with a heating unit and hinged cover, to maintain the warmth of prepared hot foods – although cold foods can also be served from a voiture. A voiture differs from a gueridon in that it is large enough to hold an entire roast. In practice, *voiture service* refers to the plating of a precooked main course, at the guest’s table, from the voiture.

#### **Advantages of Formal French Tableside Service**

Elegant

Personalized service

Showcases the food and preparation

Entertaining (flambéing, carving)

Leisurely dining

Higher check average

#### **Disadvantages of Formal Tableside Service**

Requires highly skilled servers

Requires expensive equipment

Higher labor cost

Less seating capacity

Lower number of dining room turns (seatings)

Can be too formal for some guests

### **Russian or Platter Service (Eichelberger)**

Russian service, which is mostly used for banquets, is less showy than French service but it is quicker and no less elegant. Speed replaces showmanship, though there is skill involved. The main goal of Russian or platter service is to assure the guest receives fully cooked hot food served in a swift and tasteful fashion. It is especially expedient for banquets or whenever it is necessary to serve many people attractively presented food quickly but without sacrificing elegance and a personal touch.

In Russian Service all food is fully cooked and artfully arranged and garnished on large platters in the kitchen. With the server’s right hand, empty plates are set-in from the guest’s right

beginning with the first woman seated at the host's left. The server moves clockwise around the table. The platters of food are carried to the dining room by the server and presented to the table. The server then begins with the first woman seated at the host's right, displays the food from the left, and serves the desired portion. The server transfers the food from the platter to the guest's plate by skillful manipulation of a fork on top of a spoon. The server then continues around the table counterclockwise. Sauces and garnishes are served either by that same server or by another one following right behind. The platter is held in the left hand and food is served with the right hand. Note that service and setting-in are done from the opposite sides of the guest, as compared to French and other service styles.

Even though the entire meal may not be served in the Russian service style, it remains common for servers to use Russian service to place bread on guest's plates. Additionally, the same skills required for Russian service can be helpful when splitting menu items into two plates for guests, either on the gueridon, on the side stand, or at the table.

### **Advantages of Russian Service**

- Personalized service
- Grand style
- Entertaining
- Guests may choose portion size
- Guests may choose quantity of sauces
- Server can exhibit skills

### **Disadvantages of Russian Service**

- Requires space between chairs for wide platters
- Requires skilled (and physically capable) servers
- Less portion control and may run out of items
- Food can become cold and ragged while serving
- Dangers of spilling soups or sauces

### **Butler Service (Eichelberger)**

The procedures for butler service are the same as those for Russian service, except that the guests serve themselves with the provided utensils from the platter held by the server. Beginning with the first woman to the host's right, the butler offers from the left, moving counterclockwise around the table, holding the platter in both hands. During the service of hors d'oeuvre, however, a smaller-size platter may be held in the left hand alone. This frees up the right hand to offer napkins from a small plate. If you think of a stand-up cocktail party with passed hors d'oeuvres, you can visualize a form of butler service in action.

### **Advantages of Butler Service**

- Personalized service
- Grand style
- Guests may choose portion size
- Guests may choose quantity of sauces

### **Disadvantages of Butler Service**

- Requires space between chairs for wide platters
- Requires skilled (and physically capable) servers

Less portion control and may run out of items  
Food can become cold and ragged while serving  
Dangers of spilling soups or sauces

### **English Service (Eichelberger)**

English and family service conjures nostalgic images of families gathered around a steaming roast on Sunday afternoon, with father carving the meal and passing plates around the table. In restaurants or country clubs, this style of service is usually reserved for private rooms or special group dinners where guests want to mimic a home-style setting while still being waited on. Plates are preset and the server moves clockwise around the table when clearing plates.

As with Russian service, all food is fully cooked in the kitchen. The host, or perhaps the maître d'hôtel, carves the meat (or whatever the main dish happens to be), and passes it to the nearest diner who in turn passes it along the table. This carver should be skilled in plating in an attractive and appetizing manner. The host generally serves soup into bowls, which are then passed around the table. Side dishes arrive from the kitchen in large serving platters and guests help themselves, or the host may plate the side dishes before passing the plates. Alternatively, serving dishes can be placed on a sideboard, from which the server plates all of the food, and then presents it to the guests.

### **Family Service (Eichelberger)**

Variations on the English style service that are less formal are popular in the United States, especially at new American restaurants and grills that want to create a more family-like ambience. It is also seen on tours, resorts, and small cruise ships.

Family style is similar to English style, except that all of the foods are placed on the table in large serving dishes, and guests help themselves. It is quite popular in some value-oriented restaurants, and also in places where the style fits with the theme. It is a remarkably efficient style of service that can make a lot of sense (and money) in the right situation. Customers enjoy the chance to serve themselves, it can lighten the burden in both the dining room and kitchen, and it can lower labor costs.

#### **Advantages of English/Family Service**

- Very casual
- Creates a communal atmosphere
- Guests can have second helpings
- Guests can easily share menu items
- Requires friendly but not necessarily skilled servers

#### **Disadvantages of English Service**

- Not elegant
- Large portions (or no portion control)
- No plate presentation
- Sanitation concerns

### **American Service (Eichelberger)**

The common style of setting-in plates in the United States is from the guest's left with the left hand. This is believed to have its origins in American homes with limited service staff. The maid

would clear a dirty plate from the right with the right hand, and immediately set-in the filled plate from the sideboard for the next course with the left. It was considered a breach of etiquette for a guest to sit at your table without a plate in front of them.

Among the least formal styles of service, and by far the most widespread, American service (what we do in the Heritage everyday) is usually found in bistros, trattorias, and casual restaurants. In American service, all cooking and plating of food is completed in the kitchen. A server picks up the plated food, carries it to the dining room, and sets-in the plates in front of the guests from the right with the right hand (although some restaurants prefer service to be from the left, with the left hand) This allows two or three plates to be held in the left hand and arm while serving with the right.

For small parties (less than six guests), women are served first, moving clockwise around the table, then men. For larger parties, the woman to the **left** of the host is served first. The server then proceeds, serving each guest in turn, moving clockwise around the table, finishing with the host. If there is no obvious host, the server may begin with any woman and proceed as usual. When serving from the left, the server moves around the table counterclockwise.

American service is usually employed in fast turnover, high-volume operations. It can be used in more stylish types of dining operations with procedures varying depending on the service needs. Some chefs prefer American service because plating the food in the kitchen allows them to showcase their creativity in food presentation. American service is frequently used for banquets because large numbers of guests can be handled quickly by a limited number of service personnel.

#### **Advantages of American Service**

Portion control and lower food costs  
Plate presentation  
Consistency  
Fast service  
Fewer servers required  
Less formal and more accessible  
Limited skill required

#### **Disadvantages of American Service**

Less personalized service  
Informal  
Guests cannot choose portion size  
Servers merely set-in plates

#### **House Style (Eichelberger)**

The main points of good service, regardless of the style of service, are:

1. All foods served at their appropriate temperature.
  - Hot foods served hot on hot plates.
  - Cold foods served cold on cold plates.
2. All foods and beverages served in a timely, courteous, sanitary manner.

The way any establishment goes about achieving these points can vary dramatically, depending

upon the type of service that is practiced in that establishment – In other words, the restaurant's **house style**. The kind of food to be served is an important deciding factor, but it is not the only one. Certainly the price range, ambience of the room, and the demographics of the market one wishes to attract must be considered. Other considerations go into determining a restaurant's **house style** as we have already seen, including the type of restaurant (fine dining, bistro. or family-style); the restaurant's personality (formal versus casual); and the type of menu.

### **Summary of Serving Styles Activity (Eichelberger)**

Style	Activity	From Guest's	With Server's	Move around the table	Begin with
American	Set-in	Left	Left hand	Counterclockwise	Eldest woman at host's left
American	Clear	Right	Right hand	Clockwise	Eldest woman at host's left
Russian Plattered	Serve	Left	Right hand	Counterclockwise	Woman at host's right
French	Set-in	Right	Right hand	Clockwise	Woman at host's left
French	Clear	Right	Right hand	Clockwise	Woman at host's left

### **Dining Room Brigade (Eichelberger)**

Every establishment will have some variation on the classic dining room brigade derived from the type and price level of the menu, style of service, and physical structure of the restaurant. In any size organization, it is important that everyone know to whom they report, and to whom their supervisors report. This is the essence of a brigade system, which organizes job functions into a clear hierarchy. To understand some of the hundreds of variations on the classic brigade, it is important to first understand the brigade system itself. Unfortunately, there are various interpretations of the classic brigade titles. So it is most important to understand the job descriptions and responsibilities, regardless of job title and to follow the lead of the establishment's use of the titles and job descriptions.

#### **Maître d'Hôtel**

The maître d'hôtel is traditionally the manager of the house or the entire operation. His position would be considered the general manager in modern terms. *Hôtel* and *hôte* are both derived from the French word for "host." Fundamentally, that is what the job of maître d'hôtel is about: hosting. Informally referred to as the *maître d'*. Today's maître d'hôtel is responsible for the overall management of the dining room, station assignments, public relations, and the physical maintenance of the room itself. In modern bistros or casual restaurants, this position is filled by either the manager or host (and occasionally the owner).

### **Chef de Salle**

The chef de salle is, traditionally, the manager of the dining room, though the French term is rarely used today. The maître d'hôtel is in charge of the dining room service in today's restaurants. Depending on the establishment, the Chef de Salle could be considered the head server or act as the captain of the dining room or of a primary station in the dining room as well as training service staff. The Chef de Salle would perform duties of the Maître d' in their absence.

### **Chef de Rang**

The chef de rang ("chief of the station"), also known as the "captain," is usually in charge of service in a particular station of tables, takes the orders from the guests, and assists the demi-chef de rang or commis de rang (front waiter) in serving the food. The captain, as host of his station, should rarely leave it. If necessary, the front server can leave the floor to check the status of an order in the kitchen or retrieve drinks from the bar. The captain must have a profound knowledge of food and wine and be able to translate that knowledge into language that is understandable to each and every guest. In some facilities this used to be called "chef d'étage" (literally "chief of the stage" or "floor"), but this term has not been used in many years. In hotels, the chef d'étage was the room service server. The chef de rang has more interaction with the guests than any other service staff position and cooks the tableside dishes on the réchaud and gueridon.

### **Receptionniste**

The receptionniste ("receptionist") is the person who greets (and occasionally seats) the guests, takes phone reservations, and looks after the needs of the front desk area. In casual restaurants, this position often replaces all of the previously mentioned positions, and may be called "the host(ess)."

### **Demi Chef de Rang**

This position has much overlap with the chef de rang and the commis de rang or front waiter. The demi-chef de rang performs the duties of the chef de rang in their absence and may perform table side cookery. Sometimes this position is the same as the commis de rang.

### **Commis de Rang**

In some dining rooms the commis de rang is known as the "demi-chef de rang in training," or "front waiter" Second-in-command of the station, the front waiter takes the order from the captain or chef de rang; relays it to the kitchen through the point of sale system or with a hand dupe; and serves the food with assistance from the captain and chef de rang. The front waiter often assists the captain in taking some orders, or assists the commis de suite in bringing the food from the kitchen. The front waiter's position may not be as glamorous as that of the captain, but the captain relies heavily on the front waiter's efficiency.

### **Commis de Suite**

The commis de suite (also known as the "back waiter" or "food runner", although the terms aren't exactly equivalent) brings drinks and food to the commis de rang, sets up the gueridon as needed, gets all food and beverage for the assigned station, helps clear, and generally assists the commis de rang. Commis de suite is an apprentice or commis de rang in training.



## **DéBarrasseur**

The débarrasseur, or "bus person," is often an apprentice or trainee to become a commis de suite or room service waiter and may work the way up the ranks. The bus person is responsible for stocking side stands and gueridon, and cleaning during the preparation time prior to service. While used primarily to clear the tables of soiled items, bus people are often utilized in assisting with bread and water service. Some people, unfortunately, look down on the busser. However, the busser is an extremely valuable member of the service team and can be integral to that team's success. A great busser can lighten the burden on the rest of the service team, enabling them to concentrate more on serving the guests.

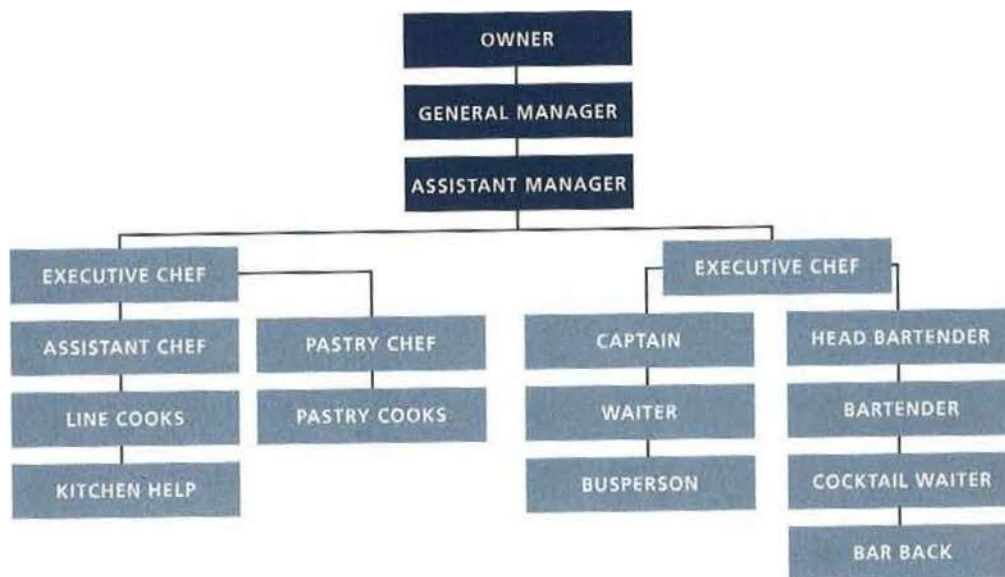
## **Trancheur**

The trancheur (carver, literally "slicer") rolls a cart or voiture, or works at a chilled station to prepare plates with the meat and accompaniments. Items might include smoked salmon or joint meats such as hams from the voiture. In modern fine dining restaurants, these functions would probably be performed by the captain or chef de rang.

## **Sommelier or Chef de Vin**

The sommelier (or wine steward) is responsible for the creation of the wine list, the purchasing and storage of wines (maintenance of the wine inventory), the recommendation of wines to guests, and the wine service itself.

## **Typical American Organization Chart (Eichelberger)**



## **Banquet Service for Special Functions (Eichelberger)**

Hosting and catering special functions – whether a wedding reception, professional meeting, retirement or birthday party, or other event – offers your establishment the chance to provide the highest level of professional hospitality for your most important guests. A banquet is (or may be) an elaborate, often ceremonial meal prepared and served to a great number of guests (or not). Regardless of the nature of the event, a banquet is a special meal, one that requires a great deal of planning. All of the factors involved – lighting, linen, wine selection, menu composition, and pace – must be planned in advance. Without proper planning, the affair cannot be executed to perfection.

*Keep in mind that any establishment that serves food can perform a banquet and even catering. These are excellent ways to increase revenue without increasing costs. Throughout this section when we refer to catering and/or banquets, the words really can be used interchangeably. The only difference is whether the actual event is on or off-premises. These events will also be referred to as “Functions” (Gendler).*

Venues for affairs such as banquets and receptions fall into four categories:

- An establishment that does on-premises banquets and off-premises catering
- An establishment or company that does off-premises catering exclusively
- A restaurant with full catering facilities (*But then why couldn't they also perform on-premise banquets? (Gendler)*)
- A restaurant with limited catering facilities (*Again, why couldn't they also perform on-premise banquets? (Gendler)*)

Planning and execution are usually the functions of the catering department in larger operations such as a hotel, but in smaller establishments this often becomes the responsibility of the dining room staff. It may be appropriate to work with an event or wedding planner or directly with the host, depending upon your client's preference.

## **Advantages Of Catering (Eichelberger)**

In catering, all sales are booked in advance. Consequently, the number of guests and the amount of food to be served are all known beforehand. This can offer some distinct advantages. For the restaurant, there are other benefits:

- Cash deposits, which ensure an adequate supply of working capital.
- Efficient portion and cost control.
- Controlled labor cost, with a set number of hours and employees required for a function.
- Reduced inventory costs (specialty items can be rented, and costs passed on to the client)
- Accurately forecasted sales and profits.
- Use of facilities and equipment during normally unproductive hours or days when the restaurant is closed.
- Revenue that can be used for upgrading facilities and equipment or for additional advertising – without having to raise menu prices. (*Huh? This is just saying it leads to extra profits – do with them what you like or need!*)
- Introduction of the restaurant to new, potentially regular, customers.

For the server, a catered affair means the prospect of a guaranteed gratuity and the possibility of additional tips for special service. Depending upon the establishment, this could also be a

negative. There are times when a server on the main floor of a great section on a Saturday night could easily make three to five times more in tips than if they worked an event. When scheduling servers to events, make sure and rotate them and ensure fair compensation. Instead of placing a gratuity on the guests invoice, make it a service charge. This way it is the house's money and the establishment can do what they please with it. This way you can augment the pay of the servers through either hourly increases especially for certain parties or with "tip pooling" (but because it is a service charge and not a gratuity, it is really not tip pooling.)

### **Banquet Service (Eichelberger)**

Banquets use several table service styles: American, platter, butler, or buffet service. Some events may use a combination of service styles such as butler service for hors d'oeuvres and buffet service during dinner. To be successful, catering personnel require a mastery of a variety of service styles and a total understanding of all the details of a function and its timing in order to provide the high level of professional hospitality that makes these special occasions memorable.

It is important to keep in mind that no matter how routine banquet service is for the server; for the guest it is a special, perhaps once in-a-lifetime event, and every effort should be made to make it perfect for them. The flow of the entire banquet is of paramount concern. The sequence of service should be consistent and timely for all tables and should follow the standards established ahead of time. Teamwork is vital during banquets. Every table should feel that they received remarkable service, that their needs were anticipated as if by a mind reader, and that there was nothing more that could have been done to make it better.

Careful planning is required, no matter which service style is employed. If established service procedures for table setup or service (for instance presetting all of the silver for the entire meal, serving from trays, using rental items such as glassware or chairs) are to be altered, these changes or variations must be organized and all service personnel briefed on the changes well before the event.

The importance of constant communication between the dining room and the kitchen during a banquet cannot be emphasized enough. The timing of courses may need to be coordinated with the band (or DJ), Champagne toast, blessing, welcome speech, cake-cutting ceremony, and so on.

A meeting for the service staff (*pre-meal*) is usually held prior to the catered affair to ensure that all servers have been briefed about their duties and have the information they may need to perform well before, during, and after the event.

The banquet manager's and the client's planned schedule of events should be fully understood by the banquet headserver, the chef, the band, the photographer, and the videographer. Last-minute changes to the schedule on the day of the event must also be communicated to all concerned.

Particular points to be covered prior to the function are:

- Menu and floor plan
- Number of tables and covers per server and per captain, if applicable
- Sequence of events, food and beverage service, and entertainment
- Mise en place with attention to special equipment
- Specific points to remember, such as specialty presentations, styles of service, or special requests

## **Staffing For A Banquet (Eichelberger)**

The number of service personnel needed a banquet depends on the total number of guests and the style of service. If American service is used at the banquet, one server should be allowed for every twenty guests; for Russian service, two servers for every thirty guests; for a buffet, one server for every thirty guest. For cocktail receptions or for butler service of hors d'oeuvres, one server should be scheduled for every thirty to forty guests.

*Obviously, the skill level of the employees will dictate whether he or she may be able to handle more or less than these “standardized” numbers. Also, this speaks to the number of servers and does not address how many assistants or bussers you may need.*

### **Service Scheduling Chart**

Type of Function	Number of Guests per server	Maximum number of tables per server
Plated Lunch or Dinner	20 - 25	Three 8-tops
Plated Breakfast	20 - 25	Three 8-tops
Buffet	30 - 35	Four 8-tops
Butler or Russian Service	15	Two 8-tops
Cocktail Reception (Server)	50	Ten high-cocktail
Cocktail Reception (Bartenders)	50	----
Bar after Meal (Bartenders)	100 *Note: In an open bar situation, about 2.5 drinks per person during the first hour then drops off after that. Consumption can be an issue. Plan bar times and meal times with the organizer to mitigate over service.	

## **Setting Up For A Banquet (Eichelberger)**

When setting up the dining room, the head table should be positioned for optimal visibility by all the guests. A dais or raised platform, can be used if necessary, to allow viewing of the head table. The rest of the table plan depends on the type of function, the size and shape of the room, the number of guests to be seated, *the service style*, and the preferences of the organizer. Round tables are ideal for banquets, since they allow for easy conversation among guests.

*Tables come in many different sizes and shapes. Become familiar with the following: round, trapezoid, half-round, serpentine, quarter-round, oval, classic banquet (These come in 6 foot or 8 foot lengths and 30 inch or 15 inch widths).*

*What needs to be known about the function room set-up?*

- *Type of function – Examples?*
- *Size and shape of the room and how many rooms are available*

- *Number of guests to be served*
- *Service style(s)*
- *Preferences (special needs/requests) of the organizer (The dreaded Mother-of-the-Bride!)*
- *Podiums/Lecterns*
- *Microphones*
- *A/V – computer, music, screen*
- *Dance floor*
- *Lighting*

*Other styles of room set-ups to keep in mind for meetings and other events are:*

- *Theater*
- *Classroom*
- *Boardroom*
- *“U”*
- *Conference – Large open center square or rectangle.*

The main focus to create the atmosphere that will allow the guest to have the greatest enjoyment or the most productive event. I have been involved with organizations that have arranged a function for their press conference where we deliberately put them in a room that was too small for their expected numbers making it very crowded. However, this had a positive effect on the television cameras recording the event because it made it look like an amazing turnout with lots of community interest in what the organization was doing.

Square footage allotments for banquets vary, depending on the specific service details, such as size of dance floor, placement of cake or gift table, and so on. For sit-down affairs, from twelve to fifteen square feet per person should be allowed. Buffet service requires a little less space, ten to twelve square feet per person.

### **Square Footage Requirements**

<i>Type of Function</i>	<i>Square footage per guest</i>	<i>Minimum space between tables</i>
<i>Casual Plated Breakfast, Lunch or Dinner</i>	<i>8 - 12</i>	<i>5 - 6 feet</i>
<i>Formal Plated Lunch or Dinner</i>	<i>12 - 15</i>	<i>7 – 10 feet depending upon cart service</i>
<i>Buffet</i>	<i>10 - 12</i>	<i>5 feet</i>
<i>Butler or Russian Service</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>7 – 10 feet depending upon cart service</i>
<i>Cocktail Reception (Server based)</i>	<i>6-8</i>	<i>5 feet</i>

All tables should be numbered. Table numbers can be mounted on stands and should be visible to guests as they enter the room. Guests can obtain their table numbers from either a master seating chart or a special reception table set-up to supply table numbers. *Make sure you and the organizer of the function are on the same page with table numbers. You don't want your servers and their guests using two different systems.*

The seating chart should be drawn up prior to the affair. The host may wish to create the seating chart, or prefer to review and approve it once generated by either the maître d' or the event organizer. The seating chart becomes an important organizational tool to check that all necessary arrangements have been made, such as ordering the correct number of floral arrangements and so forth. It also allows the management to station servers effectively as well as to plan solutions for any difficulties that might arise.

Any good seating plan has an allowance for extra guests. A good rule of thumb is to anticipate that there may be a minimum of five to ten (5-10%) percent more guests than the number of RSVPs the host received, but this number is always discussed with the host or organizer ahead of time (*and when making and serving an extra 5-10%, it is built in to the price of the event so whether these extra people show up or not, you still have all your expenses covered.*)

### **Presetting The Table (Eichelberger)**

Although it is proper to set all food and beverages after the guests are seated, at a banquet, some courses may be properly preset on the table. This may be the preferred option when a cocktail/hors d'oeuvre hour is held in a separate room from the dinner or when there is a limited amount of time for the event.

Preset items can save service time and allow more time for dancing or other planned events. Ice water glasses, bread and butter, and a cold appetizer may be in place when the guest arrive in the dining room. If a toast is planned upon seating, Champagne can be poured as well, though it is better to pour as guests are seated to avoid pouring for places occupied by anyone who might not care for Champagne or for seats that will not be occupied (*Don't forget legal age for drinking or preserving an intoxicated guest from the cocktail reception as well. You could be serving a minor by prepouring and that or intoxicated service could cost you fines or your license*). This certainly avoids waste, and also gives the server a chance to begin interacting with the table.

### **Setup For Buffet Service (Eichelberger)**

Buffets can be as elegant or informal as the client wishes. Foods are arranged on tables, which may include floral or edible arrangements, ice carvings, and other special decorative touches, such as fountains. A variety of techniques for arranging and setting up the buffet is shown below. Particular concerns of buffet service setup include the following:

- If space for the length of the buffet line is limited, create wider tables by setting additional eight-foot tables on four-inch-square blocks behind and overlapping the other eight-foot tables. The blocks should have small notched holes for the feet. The holes prevent the legs of the table from sliding off the blocks, which could cause the entire table to collapse. Using deeper holes in the front can provide a slight sloping of the table toward the guests.
- If skirting is not available for the table, use tablecloths. A seventy-two-inch cloth will cover the tabletop and drape to the floor on one side on an eight-foot table. Another

cloth of the same size will cover the other side of the table to the floor and the tabletop. This economical way of skirting can be disguised by using colored forty-five-inch squares placed at an angle, creating a bent diamond over the edge of the table.

- To add height and create more visual interest, place items on the table on a variety of improvised platforms, including inverted empty glass racks or milk crates covered with a cloth.
- Use underliners beneath sauces and dips to catch any drips. A soiled underliner can be replaced more quickly and easily than the entire cloth. Keep sauces and dips close to the table edge so that guests won't have to reach very far for them: this will result in less spillage.
- Hand-wipe plates for the buffet line before service (*technically against health code*) Dishwashing machines do not always get all of the food off the plates (*Sounds like a dishwasher issue, a stacking and racking issue, or a scraping and training issue for your dish washer team.*) It is very unappetizing for a guest to pick up a plate and find dried food adhering to it.
- Either place flatware at the buffet line (preferably at the end rather than the beginning so that the guests do not have to carry it through the line with them) or preset it at the tables. Extra china and flatware should always be available.

### **Bar Service For Banquets (Eichelberger)**

There are different kinds of bar service: open bar, consumption bar, and cash bar.

#### **Open Bar**

An open bar means that the guests may have as much to drink as they like during a specified time period (*Not exactly! You still have the responsibility to not serve someone to intoxication. This can get sticky when the host says, "But I paid for it!" We will discuss the banquet policies and contracts that you must develop and have signed by the guest to avoid such issues.*) Guests are not charged for drinks because the host pays a prearranged rate per hour.

#### **Consumption Bar**

A "consumption bar" operates like an open bar, as far as the guests are concerned. Rather than paying an hourly rate based upon an estimate, the host pays for what is actually consumed, based upon the difference between the opening and closing inventory (*unless the operation has a POS system, in which case the bartenders simply ring in the drinks as they are ordered and the host can be presented the bill.*)

#### **Cash Bar**

At a cash bar, guests pay for their drinks when they are ordered. Generally one bartender is assigned for every fifty people at either an open or cash bar.

#### **Flying Service**

Flying service is a substitute for bar service in which servers provide beverages on trays (called "flying platters") to guests as they stand and mingle. Flying service may also include trays of hors d'oeuvres served butler style.

## **Buffet Service (Eichelberger)**

Buffet service styles can incorporate many different types of service. Guests may serve themselves at a buffet, or they may be helped by a carver at the carving station, or they may be able to watch a cook preparing pasta at the pasta station. Servers may be stationed at the buffet line to assist with the service of some foods, both to make the guests' experience more pleasant and to keep waste to a minimum by offering standard portions (though it is always appropriate to let guests point out the portion they wish or to have a bit more or less than the standard portion). Even if servers are not stationed on the line to assist with service, they must keep it at the top of their concern. The buffet should always be well stocked and clean: as soon as an item is running low, the kitchen should be alerted so that a fresh item can be prepared for the line.

Servers are responsible for pouring wine as well as cold and hot beverage service at the table, clearing, and setting coffee cups, sugars, creamers, and so on.

- During a buffet, be sure to keep the table well stocked and presentable for the guests.
- Keep the buffet table and surrounding area clean, as guests frequently drop or spill food on the table or floor.
- Sometimes a buffet cannot be replenished from behind the buffet line, which means you will have to replenish from the same side as the guests are using to serve themselves. When bringing in fresh food, remember that the guests have the right of way.
- Check to be sure that the correct serving tools are on the buffet so that guests are not left stranded in front of a dish with no way to serve themselves.
- Make sure to have adequate linear feet and number of buffets or stations to serve the number of guests in your party. About fifty people can go through one buffet line in less than half an hour. This means that you could serve twice that many people with the same table if both sides of the table can be used for a double line. Stations with different foods scattered about can also help with lines.
- The design and layout of the food is important. Cold and less expensive foods should be in the front of the line, hot and expensive foods should be at the end of the line. Why?
- Labels are extremely important on a buffet line. Whether it is for religious or allergen reasons, the establishment could have dire consequences (culminating in loss of life, law suits and loss of business) for feeding someone the wrong foods.
- Position bars away from food buffets and from entrances.
- Use hot water in chafing dishes when possible.

## **The Banquet Event Order Form, Policies And Contracts (Eichelberger)**

With events of this scale, very important attention to money is crucial to the success of the restaurant or caterer. It makes sense that these large affairs be handled with contracts and deposits.

## **The BEO (Eichelberger )**

THE BEO – Banquet Event Order (Function Sheet, Event Planner, Function Form, Etc.)

This main document outlines all food and service needs requested by the guest and their function. Different establishments will call this document by differing names depending upon how the form is used and what type of facility they have. Some refer to this document as having



two parts – internal and external. However, the internal document that only employees of the hospitality company will be using is all that we will be referring to when we talk about a “function form” or “BEO”. The external document that has similar information as the BEO is actually the contract and policy sheets that you and the guest will agree to and the guest will sign and date signifying their adherence to the contract.

Items that should be documented in the BEO and contract are:

1. Day **and** Date
2. Type of event
3. Times of the differing services within the entire function/event. This could include everything from food and beverage to cake cutting, announcements, valet service, and last call, etc. etc.
4. Contact names for guests and event staff
5. Location of the event
6. Room set-up, floor plan and table setting
7. Number of guests expected and guaranteed
8. Menu of food and beverage and how charges will be calculated along with styles of service and serviceware
9. Décor and who is responsible and when the room is available for set-up
10. Food and alcohol handling policies
11. Special requests and circumstances (rentals and costs)
12. Costs, deposits, signatures, minimum guarantees, handling of cancellations, etc.

See the examples of some contracts in Blackboard. Also do a simple search in Google for Banquet Contract and see the detail and lack thereof in some operations doing business.

## **Keeping Track Of The Events**

### **Logbooks vs. Function Books**

As we have covered already in the complaint plan section, it is always a good idea to track your business with complete documentation done by several positions every day. If you have a banquet and catering arm of your business, then a separate logbook should be kept for this area by the banquet manager.

In addition to this logbook however, there must also be a comprehensive book that contains all function sheets (BEO). This book should be constantly referenced as new bookings are made so that you are always trying to maximize your capacity of the banquets and catering portion of your business, without overbooking or worse, double booking the same room.

Today there are wonderful and very affordable software programs that are Windows or Mac compatible that will do this for you as long as your staff is trained to fully utilize the software completely. Not only do these programs help track and schedule events but they give you templates for contracts, email integration for confirmations, menu tools, and a data base to help you with promotions. These programs can also help you keep track of deposits, confirmations and aid in ensuring that the function and guest qualifies for the event.

As you will see on sample contracts, there are two to three stages of confirmations for functions.

The three stages below could be combined in any way that the establishment would like:

1. Tentative Confirmation – A request comes in from a guest for a banquet on a given date. The date is available so the establishment tentatively reserves the date for the guest while beginning the communication and negotiation phase. This would give this first guest “first right of refusal”. While some may request a refundable credit card deposit, no deposit is needed at this stage unless a different guest wants the same date and is ready to confirm with a deposit. At this point, you would ask the first guest to either put down a non-refundable deposit to hold the date, or let the date go so you can book the second guest. This sounds harsh, but remember, once the date goes by, you can never sell it again – lost revenue and profit.
2. Firm Confirmation – The guest guarantees the event with a nonrefundable deposit. This deposit should approach the profit that you would make on the date if the guest cancels and you are not able to rebook the date.
3. Partial or total payment – This payment should be in the contract and expected at the point that you will lose considerable expenses if the guest cancels. Many times this is 50% and is expected just before you would have to schedule employees, order the rental equipment, linens, and food. Once these types of expenses are purchased, you need to ensure that you have the money to cover them. Many times this could be up to 6 months in advance. The final payment could be contracted either on the day of the event or even two weeks before.

### **Tableside Cookery (Eichelberger)**

It can be intimidating to have guests watching intently as you work with a sharp knife to disjoint a Cornish hen or ignite alcohol so that the flames shoot up from a copper pan. The only way to assuage the fear is experience. As servers repeat the preparation over and over, they will become more comfortable with it – and maybe even be able to enjoy the showmanship involved.

Tableside preparation can be appropriate to several types of establishments – it’s not just the province of the most formal French restaurants. In fact, a casual eatery might be a great place to introduce flaming after-dinner coffees, which gives the server a chance to up-sell.

### **The Equipment (Eichelberger)**

The type and cost of tableside cooking equipment depends on which dishes are going to be prepared. At a bare minimum, say for a cold salad, the server needs flat stable surface at a convenient height, as well as the equipment to prepare the dish. With the move to more complex preparations and hot food, the need for specialized equipment increases. Here are some items that you should be familiar with when entering into the world of tableside preparation:

- **Gueridon:** In modern dining rooms the gueridon is a rolling trolley with a few shelves –bottom ones used for storage of equipment and flatware, the top as a work surface. Gueridons should be easy to maneuver through the dining room. Typically a restaurant will have one or two for the entire dining room.



Gueridon with réchaud ready for service

- **Salad bowl:** A good-size unfinished, wooden salad bowl is used for Caesar salads as well as other tableside salads. Unfinished wood is the material of choice because its mildly rough surface allows the server to crush the garlic and anchovy fillets into a paste that will dissolve into the dressing. A smooth surfaced bowl would leave chunks of garlic and anchovy in the dressing which could be jarring to the palate.
- **Réchaud:** The term *rechauffer* means to in French, and is used to heat up or cook food in the dining room. Fuel sources vary, the most old-fashioned being alcohol. Canned Heat (or Sterno) came into favor for a while, but the current popular choice is the portable butane or propane burner. There are equipment companies that make attractive metal holder that hide the workmanlike burners from guests' view. Also available are gueridons that have built-in refillable butanes burners.
- **Copper pans:** Any cooking that will take place in the dining room should be done on attractive cookware. Copper is the most traditional and attractive metal surface (as well as the most expensive and difficult to maintain) of any sauté pans to be used in the dining room. Copper is also an excellent conductor of heat and will shorten the amount of time required to preheat the pan for cooking. *There are several classical types of pans used for tableside cooking: the round sauté, oval sauté for fish, and the large shallow suzette pan.*
- **Zabaglione pan:** One of the easiest tableside desserts is zabaglione (warm, whipped egg yolks with sugar and Marsala wine) served over fresh fruit. It's usually prepared in a hemispherical solid copper pan with a handle. The cooking is done over a réchaud or Sterno.
- **Cafe diablo set:** The dramatic coffee preparation cafe diablo requires a pan similar to the zabaglione pan, with a stand that holds the pan over a heat source so that the server can use both hands during the preparation.
- **Miscellaneous small equipment:** Cutting boards, carving and boning knives, pepper mill, soup tureens, and ladles are needed for various tableside dishes and must be in good working condition (i.e., knives sharpened) as well as attractive. Also, the serving spoon and fork should be the same length, to make one-handed service of food easier.



Gueridon with réchaud ready for service

### **The Food (Eichelberger)**

When preparing food in the dining room we can't taste the food to check the seasoning, but there are two ways to deal with this limitation. One is to use ingredients that are inherently salty or well-seasoned to begin with, such as anchovies, Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, Worcestershire sauce, and prepared mustard. The other way to ensure you prepare well-seasoned food is to pre-season some of the mise en place before it comes to the dining room. The server must depend upon the kitchen staff to achieve the goal of a well-seasoned dish.

Doneness of meat or fish is perhaps an even thornier problem. The most important factor is the amount of experience that the server has had preparing the dish. Uniformity of portion size is also important here. The fillet for steak Diane should be pounded to the same thickness every time, and the size of fish should stay within a narrow range. This will help to make cooking times similar. Whoever is involved in making this dish – the kitchen staff preparing the mise en place, the servers who will perform the tableside cooking – should have a chance to practice the

dish at least once before making it for a guest.

It's not just seasoning that is difficult to do in the dining room. You may need to thicken a cream sauce directly in the sauté pan when there really isn't enough time to reduce it. The trick is that the kitchen staff has either reduced the cream ahead of time or added just enough arrowroot powder or other thickening agent to the cream to make it thicken as soon as the pan gets hot while you are preparing the sauce.

### **Flaming Alcohol (Eichelberger)**

Adding a flammable substance (such as a liqueur) to a sauté pan that is right above an open flame can be very dangerous. If the stream of alcohol coming from the bottle is too close to the burner's flame, the fire can travel up that stream and into the bottle, causing the contents to explode sending flaming alcohol and broken glass all over the guests and your staff. Such a tragedy can be avoided by removing the pan from the réchaud before adding the liqueur.

### **Tableside Cooking Tips (Eichelberger)**

- Never, ever touch any of the food with your fingers (touching a banana's peel is fine, however).
- During most tableside cooking, hold the fork in your left hand, spoon in your right. Spoon and fork are held in the same hand only for serving.
- Put the mise en place onto the gueridon in the order in which it will be used (*in the recipe*). It helps you to stay organized when nerves take over.
- If you need to clean off the spoon while cooking, don't bang it on the side of the sauté pan – just wipe off the bottom of the spoon with the fork
- When sautéing, preheat the pan before adding the food. To avoid splattering the guest with hot fat, large pieces of meat or fish should be laid in the pan toward you – the opposite of what you would do in the kitchen.
- When moving the finished product to the plate, be careful not to let any of the food fall from the service ware.
- If you drop something on the floor, don't acknowledge it, make a face, or even look at it – most of the guests will never notice. When you have finished plating, place a serviette over the dropped item and pick it up.
- Don't be overly meticulous. You don't have to turn over every banana slice or every shrimp in the pan. Guests get bored.
- Keep dishes relatively simple. Don't go overboard with the number of ingredients or complexity of the method.
- When sautéing, do not shake or slide the pan on the burner. Also don't scrape the utensils across the bottom of the pan. No noises should be heard. You are creating a show of finesse and elegance.
- Once finished with an ingredient, place the used ramekin or dish and utensil on the lower shelf.
- Always use a utensil to move ingredients from the dishes to the pan – Never dump.
- Always have extra serviettes, plates, utensils, butane, and some ingredients on the cart.
- Always have a fire extinguisher on the cart.

## **Cheese**

*Section TBD – for now the PPT lecture and cheese making day more than fulfills this area.*

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## **Front of The House**

RESTAURANT MANNERS, MISBEHAVIORS, & SECRETS

JEFF BENJAMIN WITH GREG JONES

FOREWORD BY MARC VETRI

Front of the House: Restaurant Manners, Misbehavior s & Secrets

Jeff Benjamin with Greg Jones

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## **Remarkable Service**

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The Culinary Institute of America

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