

## CHANGE @ WORK

### At your service

#### Restaurants get serious about developing - and keeping - the wait staff

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The next time you dine in a restaurant, consider how your waiter or waitress approaches the job:

A no-nonsense order-taker and meal deliverer?

Or someone who is intent on enhancing your dining experience?

Billy Lee, a waiter at Tellers Chophouse in Islip, falls into that second category. He's a career waiter, and, as such, he studies up on cheeses (even though he's not much of a cheese lover). He takes classes on wines. He visits other restaurants on his days off and samples some pretty unusual dishes.

He speaks, too, of the nuances of his job: As he waits on customers, he says, he takes pains to guide expectations and describe the dishes before they hit the table - "I paint a mental visual picture." And as meals are set before each diner, he watches facial expressions. What's he looking for? Easy, he says - it's that "wow" expression that signifies success.

The nature of his job is in contrast to the common perception of wait staffs: people who are still in school or between jobs - or waiting for that big acting break.

#### Burnishing the image

Of course, there always have been career waiters, especially in finer restaurants. But recently the image of the restaurant serving staff has been cranked up a notch, as Food Network fans continue to develop an appreciation of food preparation and presentation and growing numbers of people are inspired to find work in the food and hospitality industries.

This development comes as some restaurants have decided that attracting - and retaining - wait staff professionals is a key to success. Fast-food restaurant chains have been offering health insurance, 401(k)s and enhanced training, and some groups of high-end restaurants have started doing so, too. Such benefits at mom and pop establishments are rare.

But such jobs always have been known for their downsides - among them those long hours spent on your feet. And, of course, weekends and some holidays spent serving other people's families.

According to the United States Department of Labor, about one in four food and beverage servers and related workers fall in the 16 to 19 age range. Of waiters and waitresses, half were working part-time, according to 2004 data. Interestingly, at some point in their careers, close to half of all adults - and two-thirds of those in the 35 to 44 age group - have worked in the restaurant business, according to the National Restaurant Association.

When it comes to dining room service specifically, "there is greater interest in this as a career path," says Bernard

Martinage, founding president of the Federation of Dining Room Professionals, an educational organization in Fernandina Beach, Fla. He says one emerging group that is expressing interest in those "front of the house" jobs (food serving, bartending, managing) are the food fans who give chef school a try, but, for various reasons, shift course.

#### From kitchen to dining room

That would be the case with Jay Poblador, 31, who studied to become a chef but was diverted to the dining room. Director of service at Country, a restaurant at the Carlton Hotel in Manhattan, he says he's come to enjoy the closer contact with guests and immediate feedback. Plus, he's getting great experience for opening his own establishment one day.

But there is a stigma: "Some parents are horrified" at the notion of their kids' being career waiters, Martinage says. His group is working to deal with that perception by offering certification in various levels of dining room service, from apprentice to master. And last year Martinage helped judge a new contest for professional waiters - not one of those slapstick competitions where waiters race carrying trays, but one that involves table setting, flambéing and decanting.

He's even suggesting we send the terms "waiter" and "waitress" into oblivion and call these workers "dining room hosts."

So the job is evolving - but what about the income?

Martinage says captains - those who lead a team of such dining room hosts - can earn as much as \$100,000 a year in some restaurants, especially some high-end Manhattan establishments. Those waiters on the team could bring in \$60,000 to \$70,000, says Poblador.

Martinage concedes that true professionals make the work look effortless. But to borrow from his group's motto: "Simplicity is a lot of work."

Katherine Fahey, a server at the Three Village Inn in Stony Brook, concurs. A real professional gets "further into the detail" of a diner's needs, she says. Chefs often joke with her when she delivers orders that she and the diner have tailored to the diner's special dietary needs.

Indeed, to be certified by the Federation of Dining Room Professionals, waiters need to demonstrate knowledge of issues ranging from the different types of vegetarianism to ingredients that trigger allergies to food restrictions for various religious groups.

And "the demand for basic training is dramatic," says Paul Paz, a career waiter in Beaverton, Ore., and founder of WaitersWorld.com, a resource site. In our fast-food culture, "the details of dining etiquette," once taught at home, have been lost, he says. And the image of being a waiter "is still a hurdle. Culturally we are not conditioned to accept a career choice as a professional waiter," and within the industry only the job of chef is seen as the glamorous one.

"You do need to take pride in your work," says Fahey of Ridge, who's been a server for 30 years. "I get personal satisfaction from it."

She is the mother of daughters ages 8 and 10 and finds the day-to-day flexibility the job offers attractive. She does concede that it's hard to work holiday shifts, but recently she has managed to take Christmas Eve off. She says her employer tries to be accommodating, but holiday and weekend work are realities of the hospitality business.

Annie Hubbard, a captain at the Gotham Bar and Grill in Manhattan, says she sees her job as "a strange version of job-sharing." There may be close to 30 servers, but on most occasions only about 11 are needed at a given time. That allows the opportunity to work for a three-star establishment, earn a living and have the flexibility to pursue other interests - in her case, she is pursuing acting.

#### Offering benefits

Staff turnover has customarily been an issue for restaurants of all types. But some are getting on board with enhanced benefit packages and training initiatives, and tenure seems to be on the rise, according to the National Restaurant Association.

The Three Village Inn, for example, offers health benefits, a 401(k) program and paid vacations for full-timers, says Lou Miaritis, executive vice president of its parent company, Lessing's Inc. A board member of the New York State Restaurant Association, Miaritis says he's been vocal about the need for restaurants to commit to offering such benefits. Nevertheless, change has been slow.

There are other rewards. June Douglas, 66, a server at the Three Village Inn, says she's moved by the relationships she's formed with some regular diners. They've given her hugs, inquired about her dog, and even sent her prayers when she visited Israel during a tense time.

At Tellers Chophouse, full-time hourly and salaried employees get subsidized medical and dental coverage; 401(k)s, to which their employer kicks in a matching 25 percent contribution; and paid vacation at the base pay rate of \$4.35 an hour, without tips. (Depending on a waiter's skill, the day of the week, the time of year, he or she can bring in \$18 to \$35 each hour, sometimes more, in tips.)

The cost of replacing employees who leave is an estimated \$10,000 each, says owner Michael Bohlsen. That's why he says he's committed to creating an environment in which wait staff can learn and grow. The restaurant pays 50 percent of the fee to attend a continuing education program with the Sommelier Society of America. And he's brought in Dale DeGroof, known in the restaurant industry as the "King of Cocktails," to offer seminars. Once a week, a manager will present a 15-minute session on topics ranging from oysters of the Pacific Northwest to cheeses from Vermont.

### Teaching the patrons

Such learning experiences are rewarding for employees, Bohlsen says, and can help them "turn around and teach their clients, too." Indeed, Tellers' Lee, 46, of Farmingdale, says he gets a kick from introducing diners to new things - perhaps a cut of beef they've never tried or a new brand of gin. It's about "opening up their thinking," he says, but without being pushy.

Martinage wants his certification program to give validation to such expertise. In many ways, he says, a dining room host needs to know as much about the night's offerings as a chef - in addition to knowing about how to take care of customers.

At the root of making it in this career is the desire to please, says John Fischer, maître d' instructor at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park. "If you don't get pleasure from giving pleasure, you're not in the right business," says Fischer, author of "At Your Service: A Hands-On Guide to the Professional Dining Room" (Wiley, \$29.95). Needless to say, a strong interest in food is also a requirement, as well as the ability to "read" customers.

In a sense, for those who get immersed in the world of food and hospitality, he says, it's "like running away with the circus. You get picked up by it and say goodbye to everyone in your former life. What with the evening hours, holiday work, continuing education, you say to your family, albeit tongue-in-cheek, 'I'll see you sometime next year.'"

12.5M

Number employed in restaurant industry nationwide

1.9M

Jobs expected to be added by 2016

4in10

Adults who have worked at some time in restaurant industry

27%

Adults who say they got their first job experience at a restaurant

647,400

Estimated number of restaurant/food service workers in New York State

50,900

New York jobs expected to be added through 2016

SOURCE: NATIONAL RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION

Getting those all-important tips

Waiters usually get paid a small hourly wage, but their real earnings come from tips. And while those generally are a function of good all-around service, waiters can try a variety of techniques aimed at getting a bigger tip.

One is the direct approach employed by staff at The Shack, an outdoor clam bar-restaurant in Centerport. Some patrons think they can scrimp on tips, says owner Mace Colodny. After all, the staff doesn't actually wait on tables; customers line up to place orders at a window, and an announcement notifies them when meals are ready. To augment their wages, servers have created Top 10 lists - a little on the cheeky side - of reasons they are deserving of tips. A sampling:

Tipping gives you a more youthful-looking appearance.

We are like bartenders - only better. We serve food, too.

We dig beige mini-vans. ... Yeah, beige is back!

The price of gas - need we say more?

It makes your food taste better when you tip.

The wait staff also can employ body language and psychology, says Richard Freilich, director of the Culinary Arts Program at Suffolk County Community College. At some establishments, he says, waiters kneel so they're eye-level with diners - a tactic intended to create more of a personal connection. And you may pick up the bill, only to find it adorned with a smiley face - a little hokey, yes, but one designed to generate positive feelings at tip time.

Of course, there also are basic selling techniques: Since a tip is customarily based on the amount of the bill, the higher the bill, the bigger the tip. So, says Rick Sampson, president and chief executive of the New York State Restaurant Association, a smart server would avoid asking, "Would you like anything else?" and instead try, "Could I interest you in the chef's special - our fabulous Key lime pie?"

Resources

Fdrp.com: Federation of Dining Room Professionals

WaitersWorld.com: Tools, training, links, e-group

USAWaiter.com: Training, staffing, consulting

"At Your Service: A Hands-On Guide to the Professional Dining Room," by John W. Fischer (Wiley, \$29.95)

"Remarkable Service: A Guide to Winning and Keeping Customers for Servers, Managers, and Restaurant Owners," by the Culinary Institute of America (Wiley, \$29.95)

"Lessons in Service from Charlie Trotter," by Ed Lawler (Ten Speed Press, \$24.95)