



palate pleasures

First came the Chef, then came the Waiter ... Or is it the other way around?

In the biz we refer to it as 'Front of House' and 'Back of House'. Two components of the same engine, both essential for its well-oiled operation.

Waiters generally get a bad rap in this country as I've touched on before in previous columns. Lousy pay, lack of future prospects, unsociable hours – not to mention being directly in the firing line of disgruntled members of the public – to name a few drawbacks.

So much of the experience of dining out is subjective – based on an individual's perception at a given moment in time. This is where the skill (or lack thereof) of the waiter can make or break the deal ...

Getting good food out onto the table is easy - easy, but not effortless. A combination of great ingredients, skill in food preparation, delegation and finely honed systems and procedures in the kitchen leads to quality output and consistency for the most part. It's about getting the formula right, and then executing it over and over again, achieving the same results every time.

Once you've got this right, there aren't too many variables that can throw a spanner in the works.

Back of house is sorted – so front should be too right?

Not quite, because out there you've got those immediate recipes for chaos ... human beings. Moods, emotions, social anxieties, dietary requirements, budgetary concerns – the lot!! (and then some).

This is where the waiter has the power to transform a dining experience. It takes an enormous amount of skill to reverse a person's dissatisfaction - Salmon not cooked enough – no problem ma'am, we'll whisk it away and ensure it's well done. Don't like this table – just a quick swap in the reservations book and you'll feel like a rock star. Too cold – we'll shut the door. Too hot – we'll put the roof over. There's not enough choices for a vegetarian – we're sure the kitchen can provide you with another option. The list is endless ...

There are a multitude of demands that need to be dealt with quickly, efficiently and without fuss. Inability to cater to a customer's requirements is the difference between a pleasant and unpleasant experience, the difference between feeling comfortable, full of good cheer - and feeling neglected and ostracised.

A waiter needs to know how to gauge a customer's expectations, as well as possessing a finely tuned sense of occasion – to know how much amiable chit-chat is acceptable, to know when not to interrupt, to know that a couple are probably on their first date and the guy wants to seem really knowledgeable about wine (even though he isn't!), to know that this older couple rarely go out but tonight is their 50th wedding anniversary ...

For some people a night out a restaurant is simply a night that they're tired and don't feel like cooking, for others it's a monumentally significant occasion which might only happen once a year (or less!).

A good waiter always possesses knowledge - of the menu, of the wine-list, of the names and requirements of regular customers, of the area, of the history of the business. An ability to be able to answer questions articulately and confidently impresses customers and immediately builds trust and sense of security.

A great waiter has all the above attributes but also has that little something extra. Call it charm, call it personality ... It's something that is innate in a person and can't be taught - a natural affinity and empathy with humanity which transcends perfunctory and efficient interaction, creating warmth, hospitality and real joy within a social situation.

The waiter who is blessed with this has real power – even if the food is average and the table near the toilet, the customers will still go away raving about the fantastic service, and how they will bring the family next time.

It's a tough job. On any given shift, a good waiter is not only thinking of what table needs to order next, who needs to be cleared, whose drinks need topping up, where the food is for Table 6 – but how to make that 50th anniversary couple feel special, to check that the lady whose salmon wasn't cooked enough is now enjoying her meal, to get back to the first-date couple and see how they are getting on with that bottle of old-vine shiraz ...

A great waiter is more than invaluable to a restaurant - harder to find and keep than a good chef!

Next time you go to a restaurant and enjoy the service as much or more than the food, spare a thought for the highly skilled or perhaps lack thereof, if they made your night, acknowledge it as they have for you ...