

# Educating your staff

While good food and a solid location are important to any venue's success, the people on the front line should not be overlooked. **Neil Fortes** explains why staff knowledge is power



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**A**s a wine distributor in Canada, I have travelled to many countries to build my wine portfolio. Throughout my travels, I have experienced service that has been pleasant, poor and mediocre.

It's often the case that language barriers interrupt quality service, but not always. It's the intention of the wait staff, more than the words being spoken, that carries the message to the patron.

For instance, in Italy where English is not always spoken, the service is generally exceptional. Why? Generally speaking, wait staff in Italy has a passion for moving customers into the dining experience, no matter what the level of food is served.

I have also experienced very poor service in fine dining restaurants where English is spoken and the server has not been able to impart the venue's message to the customer, resulting in an overall poor dining experience.

Having just returned from South Africa, the land of my birth, I experienced dining with generally poor service, as a result of wait staff that do not understand serving as a profession and thus do not strive to reach a level of excellence.

My background as an industrial psychologist, together with my experience in the food and wine industry has motivated me to compile different training methods to change the service experience for wait staff in the industry.

## THE CONDUIT

Service staff is the primary line between the food and drink in your restaurant and your customer, which means the status of the server should never be overlooked.

Wait staff provide many levels of contact with the customer. The server conveys the image of the business to the customer by dress code, delivering the menu and the explanation of the food and wine that is available.

Frankly, a server is a tool for success or failure. Customer interaction with your wait staff will establish what is ordered. Meanwhile, the bill (including the tip) will indicate to the operator and wait staff whether the guests had a positive dining experience.

Many restaurant owners do not give sufficient consideration to servers in general. This may be reflected by attitude, remuneration and the availability of training.

With this understanding in mind, restaurant owners can develop a team of people who will be able to drive a restaurant into a position of success. Servers are the worker bees, working towards the goal of supporting the hive and ensuring survival. In these difficult times, every customer needs to be appreciated to ensure repeat business.

## TRAINING TIPS

Wait staff are a walking advertisement for your establishment. Choose staff based on their personality, rather than experience. It's easier to train someone with potential and a bit of knowledge of the job, rather than re-train someone set in their ways, who will not work within the mechanics of the restaurant.

Motivational methods will help ensure staff satisfaction and energy. One of the most common motivation techniques is to provide staff incentive. For instance, awarding the person who sells the most bottles of wine with extra remuneration (ie. movie tickets) provides incentive for staff to do their best.

Using a mnemonic recall system for wait staff to remember their function is also a method I suggest. It particularly helps new wait staff ingrain the key functions of their job. For instance, the SWAP method stands for Service, Waiting, Attention and Payment, while the TAP method stands for Timing, Awareness and Procedure.

Next, role-playing can help staff navigate their role, relative to their customer. Walking staff through difficult situations with picky or disgruntled customers will ensure they are prepared for anything.

Involving all employees – no matter how big or small their role or how often they work – to discuss work issues is a must if team-building is something you value at your establishment. The more interaction staff has with each other, the more likely they'll be able to look to other employees for help and support when a problem arises.

#### **KNOWLEDGE IS POWER**

Wait staff simply cannot do their job to the best of their ability without knowledge of the food and wine served in your establishment.

Food and wine menus change regularly and these items must be tasted and understood as the changes occur. Many restaurateurs buy wines they love without consulting their staff and then wonder why the particular wine does not sell.

Ask your wine server what types of wines customers most often request, or which ones on the list they enjoy serving. It's a constant process but continuous assessment will ensure seamless service.

If not all of your servers possess an interest in wine, then another team member can be brought to the table that has a better understanding of the available wines.

Good food and wine needs to be delivered to its end user efficiently and with purpose. It is only with this in mind that your restaurant will achieve success. The importance of proper education and training of service staff should not be ignored, as your servers are the ones interacting with your customers. The goal is always to create positive, memorable experiences that will encourage your customers to return and grant you the repeat business you so deserve. 🍷

#### **ENSURE STAFF...**

- tastes all of the wines on the wine list and samples all menu items, with help from a wine agent or sommelier and the executive chef. This will help staff sell your menu or wine list and better equip them to make recommendations.
- have basic knowledge of wine and food pairings to direct guests if they are ordering an unfavourable combination of food and wine. This is to protect the guests' experience.
- understands the image of your restaurant. They can't portray what they don't understand