

# CONSISTENCY

By David Rothschild

# F&B

**“W**hat do you see as the No. 1 problem in your restaurants?” I recently asked a casino food and beverage director. “Consistency,” he replied.

I've heard this response time after time at our initial meeting with supervisors and managers of various properties. Interestingly, when servers are asked the same question, they often have the same reply. Consistency can be a catchall word for a multitude of concerns. It can apply to all areas of a restaurant: food, service and ambiance. I agree that it's a major concern and is perhaps the most important element of a successful restaurant. It's also the most difficult to achieve.

A mystery shopping service can't really spot this problem. A mystery shop is a snapshot in time; a single experience that can't be compared to another. You, as the restaurant manager or F&B director, have to put yourself in the diner's shoes — during every meal period, every day of the week.

Chain restaurants have an understanding of how important consistency is to their operation. As a diner in a chain restaurant, I want to know that my previous experience in Santa Monica, Calif., will be replicated when I dine at a sister restaurant in Milwaukee, Wis. I want to know what to expect: no surprises and no “fear factor.” I'm not expecting great. I'm expecting comfortable and recognizable.

Staff turnover is a major concern to a restaurant and to its regulars. As a guest, I'm comforted to see the same familiar, cheerful, smiling faces I saw on my previous visits. This goes from the charming hostess at the door to the supervisor/manager who visits my table to say hello. I know, from past experience, that the servers will be attentive without being invasive. They've been well trained and are knowledgeable about the menu and wine list.

This isn't always the case. I've returned to a restaurant after several months and it appears that the entire staff is new. This affects my comfort level right from the start. I begin to notice other differences...The servers aren't all dressed alike. Some are wearing their shirtsleeves rolled up.

Others have their full-length aprons folded in half and tied in the front. There's nothing uniform about their uniforms.

The lighting that was just right the last time we were in for dinner now seems to have dead spots in various places around the room. It looks like it might rain in some sections. The music had been muted jazz and appropriate to the restaurant concept. This trip, the music is rock and roll and at much too high a decibel level. The last time I was here, my server knew the specials and described them with mouth-watering verblage. Tonight's waiter had to go check with the kitchen to find out about the daily specials.

The last time we were in, we commented to one another that the server did a good job of beverage service, using a bar tray professionally. This time our drinks were hand-carried to the table. Wine service had been well executed on our previous visit. The entire ritual observed: wine bottle presented, tasting poured and then glasses filled. Tonight, the wine had been opened at the bar and partially re-corked. No ceremony — just plopped into the wine glass.

The last time I was here, I ordered the Chicken Cacciatore. It was wonderful. Bone-in chicken breast and thigh, slow-cooked in a tomato sauce, accompanied by outstanding garlic bread. I raved about it to several friends. Tonight, the dish came out with a boneless, baked chicken breast napped with tomato sauce just before service. Not bad, just not what I expected. By the way, the garlic bread had morphed into bake-off dinner rolls.

Where we once had been encouraged to have a cocktail and take our time perusing the menu, this waiter hovered nearby to take our order and our entrees arrived long before we were finished with our salads. I've been to buffets where the peel and eat shrimp on one occasion were 16/20s and, on the next visit, they were, at best, 36/40s. The brand name Ketchup at the table had been replaced by generic catsup. Guests notice. And they're not usually pleased about it.

## The Hallmark of a Good Restaurant

Sometimes the changes are for the better. On a repeat visit to a restaurant, the dusty silk flowers had been replaced by fresh floral arrangements. Tables were set instead of the ubiquitous silverware roll-ups. The glassware and silverware had been upgraded. The service team uniforms had been changed: servers, bussers and hostesses were dressed uniquely to their position. Fresh seasonal vegetables accompanied our entrees in contrast with the tired, frozen vegetables we had on our first visit.

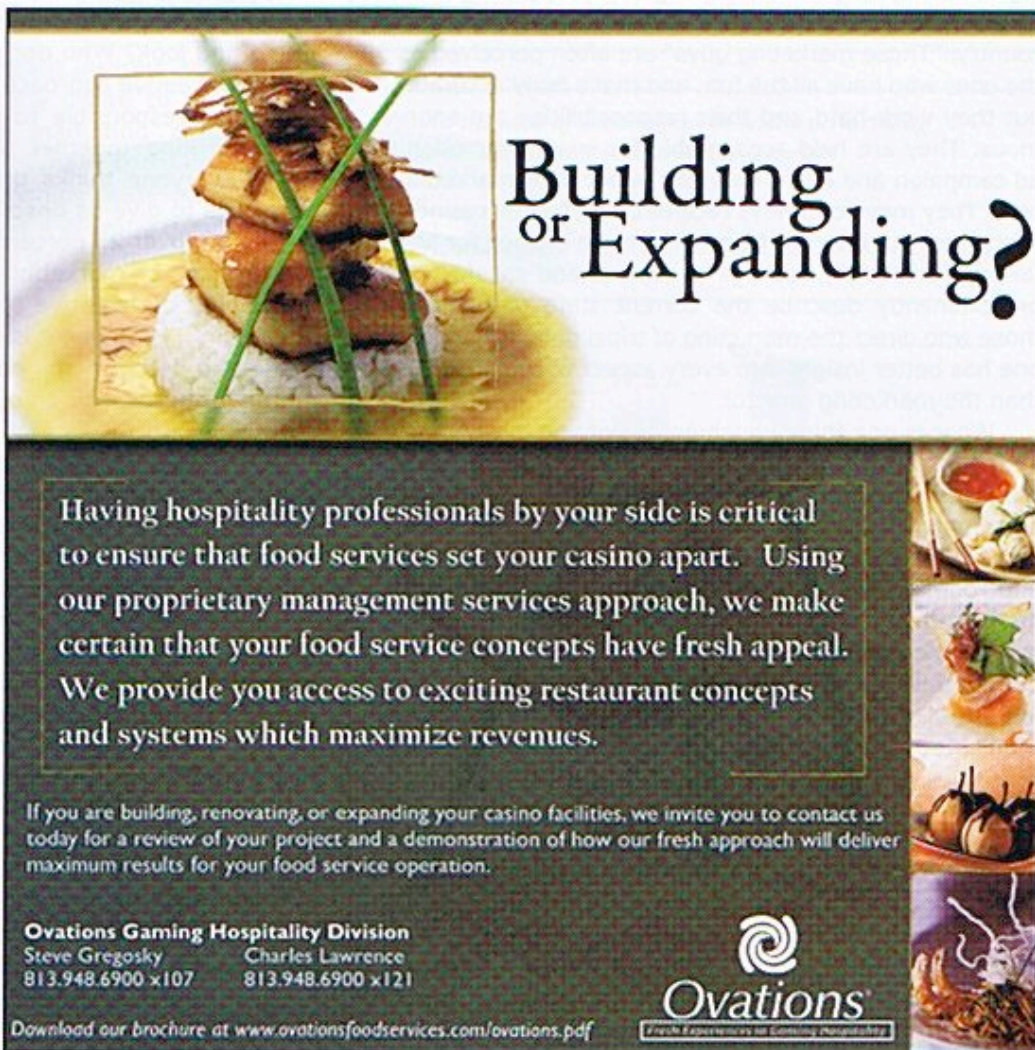
Okay, I'll admit that these accounts are composites of many dining experiences. They didn't all happen at one place or during one meal. But I hope they'll give you a feel for the importance of consistency in your operation. Here's a checklist to use as a guideline:

- **Staff Retention:** Have you cultivated a team of veteran servers whom your guests know — and who know your guests?
- **Product Knowledge:** Can all of your servers answer questions about the menus and specials and make suggestions?
- **Portion Sizes:** Do you have detailed specs for each menu item?
- **Ingredient Quality:** Do your purveyors always provide you with the same brands and food from the same producers or locations?
- **Uniforms:** Have you indicated to staff (both front- and back-of-house) precisely how uniforms are to be worn?
- **Tables and Tabletops:** Is your dining room pleasingly symmetrical with everything aligned (from tables and chairs to candles and silverware)?
- **Ambiance:** Have you set policies for music genre and sound level; is lighting appropriate to your concept?
- **Service Skills and Food Delivery System:** Are all servers using beverage trays and delivering food in the same

manner (hand-carrying, trays and tray jacks)?

- **Timing and Pacing of the Meal:** Have you established a system of ordering from the kitchen and delivery to the diner that's efficient without making guests feel rushed? Look around your restaurant during the next few meal periods and you'll undoubtedly be able to add to the list. Then work toward addressing and achieving each item. Consistency in all aspects of your operation will help establish a good reputation for your restaurant and build repeat business. **NAC**

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