

DINERS USE MOUTHS FOR MORE THAN EATING

F&B

By David Rothschild

a pet peeve is an insignificant, minor annoyance; something that's frustrating to you, but doesn't really bother someone else. Inevitably, when I'm a guest on a radio show, the host steers the segment toward diners' pet peeves in a restaurant. It makes for good radio. Everyone has a minor gripe about something they've experienced while dining.

I recently browsed the Internet in search of restaurant gripe sites. There are plenty of them — providing both the guests' and staffs' perspectives. On the consumer side, you'll find everything from newspaper articles dedicated to the subject to intense, in-depth, interactive discussion boards. Operators, it might be worth your while to check them out sometime. There's certainly a lot of food for thought.

Below, I've listed some of the top peeves that have been posted. I've edited and paraphrased the wording for the sake of brevity and clarity, but the gist of them remains. While I've divided the gripes into eight categories, many could be placed in several.

SANITATION

- sneezing/coughing into hand
- sticky tables
- stained uniforms
- spots on silverware
- chipped dishes or glasses
- dirty menus
- glasses held by the rim
- touching food for service
- foreign object in food
- greasy salt and peppers
- ketchup bottles coated at neck
- crumbs in booths or chairs
- staff eating or drinking

SERVICE

- servers with an attitude
- taking too long with first drink
- auctioning off food
- silverware not replaced
- entrees served before salad cleared
- having to ask for drink refills
- topping off drinks
- no satisfaction check back
- clearing before finished eating
- not waiting to clear 'til all finished
- not suggesting to-go box
- presenting to-go box with dessert
- not continuing to pour wine

AMBIANCE

- tables that are too close
- wobbly tables and chairs
- stained or ripped upholstery
- salt and pepper not on table
- dirty restrooms
- candles not lit
- silverware set crooked
- table linen with holes
- too dark/too bright
- inappropriate or loud music
- wilted flowers with murky water
- lack of (or unclear) signage

SEATING/GREETING

- greeted with a number, "One?"
- long wait to be seated
- unrealistic waiting time
- hostess walks too fast
- being seated, then ignored
- server introduces self by name

FOOD

- soup/coffee not hot enough
- poor quality coffee
- poor quality bread
- butter that's too cold
- running out of menu items
- poor perceived value
- food not as described

SERVICING THE CHECK

- bill arrives with my entree
- check left without asking about dessert
- "do you need change?"
- not providing proper change
- not delivering check quickly when asked for it
- smiley faces on the bill

MANAGEMENT & OPERATIONS

- opening late; closing early
- refuses to split checks
- understaffed
- unexpected charges on bill
- not getting good stemware
- upselling
- unresolved complaint
- no manager presence in restaurant

SERVER ETIQUETTE & VERBIAGE

- rude, inattentive, overeager
- stuffy/too familiar
- reads the specials from pad
- recites specials without prices
- not writing down order; writing and still getting it wrong
- not being informed of 86s
- doesn't know ingredients
- has never tasted the food

For me, as a diner, the primary rule of service is that the service team never does anything that makes the guest feel wrong, stupid or clumsy. It's interesting to me that this response, or a variation, doesn't appear more on lists. Most of us have had a server correct our pronunciation of a menu item or laugh when we spilled something on ourselves. I guess we've just grown to expect this.

I suggest you post this list somewhere in your restaurants. Provide a place for managers, supervisors, servers, bussers and hostesses to make additions, based on both their interaction with guests and their own dining experiences. Take the time to go over some of these minor guest annoyances at your preshift meetings. During training, create role-playing situations using these gripes. Brainstorm on ways to head off the complaints and to address them when they do occur. We'll never eliminate all guests' pet peeves, but perhaps we can minimize them.

Sometime in the next few months, I'd like to give you a chance to have a say from "your side of the table" and devote an article to discussing servers' top peeves about diners. So please take a few minutes to e-mail me those irritating incidents you've encountered. Encourage your staff to send theirs, too. If I get enough response, I'll devote this space in an upcoming month to your top guest gripes. If you'd like to share some ways of coping with annoying guests or diffusing difficult situations, I'll be happy to pass those along as well. **NAC**

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