

# KNOWLEDGE IS POWER FOR YOUR WAITSTAFF

by David Rothschild



I remember as a server in an upscale restaurant, going to work and being handed a totally new menu as I came on shift. This occurred fairly regularly. I'd look at my fellow servers, all seasoned professionals, and I'd ask them how they were going to describe and sell the menu to their guests. The usual answer: "Fake it!" And we did. After a few days of seeing the menu items and getting some guest feedback, we'd gradually grow comfortable with the new offerings.

I thought this was a strange way for a restaurant to present its "catalogue" to its "sales force." At the time, I attributed it to the idiosyncrasy of the chef/owner. After many years and many similar experiences in a variety of fine dining establishments, I found that this was the norm and not the exception. How can servers be expected to answer guests' questions or supply honest, knowledgeable suggestions?

Of course, not all restaurateurs operate in this fashion. Many do a terrific job of training the staff on the menu when a restaurant first opens. The staff is gathered: supervisors, servers, bussers, hosts/hostesses, chefs and cooks. All are presented with a copy of the menu and menu specs. On the spec sheet, each item is spelled out: which plates are to be used, the portion size, method of cooking, which accompaniments, etc. The chef goes over each dish. I've seen this presentation done quite effectively as a PowerPoint slideshow. The chef and restaurant manager add details, selling points and take questions. The restaurant manager or wine steward/sommelier then goes over the wine list and liquor offerings. The following day, the menu is prepared for tasting by the staff.

After the initial training, it's important that we continue to provide the waitstaff

with the information and assistance they need to stay current and knowledgeable. When done in an informative, interactive way, pre-shift meetings can be a great tool. This is the time and the place to introduce and taste the evening's specials. After the tasting, I'd ask a server or two to describe the dish as he would to a guest. I quiz my staff on the menu at every pre-shift meeting. There are always a number of servers on the staff who are uncomfortable describing and selling the menu. This is the time for them to practice. Be encouraging and help them to polish their descriptions. Pair up servers: one experienced and comfortable with describing the menu with one whom is new and not as savvy. Ask them to describe two menu items, perhaps an appetizer and an entree to each other as if they were tableside and interacting with a guest. You'll find that the mentor servers enjoy this exercise as much as the novice. They both end up learning and growing from it.

Be sure, too, that you take time during the pre-shift meeting to make the service team aware of any special requests, special needs, VIP guests or any other details that will cue them in to where extra attention will be needed during the upcoming shift.

If alcohol is served in your restaurant, a sampling of wine at the pre-shift meeting is in order. Many tribal properties will not allow the staff to drink alcohol on the premises. If this is the case, I suggest management arrange for off-site tastings through their liquor distributors. Because of their lack of knowledge and their inexperience, many servers are hesitant to suggest wine. Your restaurant can be missing out on a very lucrative revenue stream.

Create what I call "cheat sheets" for both the menu and the wine list. Next to each item on the menu or wine list, include a short

example of how the server could describe the dish or wine to a guest. For example: Baked Tilapia: Flaky white fish fillet, encrusted with sunflower seeds and baked. Comes with garlic mashed potatoes and candied carrots. Or: R.H. Phillips 2005 EXP Viognier: Peach and apricot flavors, nicely balanced fruit and acidity. Encourage the new servers to carry the cheat sheet with them for the first few days of shadowing or service. Ask them to try not to read from the cheat sheet, but to use it as a guide. It's important that the verbiage the server uses is his own; otherwise, it'll sound like a recitation.

One of the first food and beverage managers I worked for offered the waitstaff the opportunity to dine at another fine dining establishment in the city and he would pick up the check. The only stipulation was that the server would have to submit all receipts and then commit to a two-page review of the dining experience. The server was to include recommendations of procedures or practices that could be implemented in our restaurant as a change in, or improvement to, current practice. As far as I know, I was the only server to take him up on his offer. I learned a lot from the experience.

Many of our fine-dining servers have never dined in a restaurant of the caliber of the one they work in. How can they know what's really appropriate and what's not? I know of restaurateurs who've taken the entire staff to another highly regarded restaurant as a learning experience. It not only increased the team's food, wine and service knowledge, it was, in its own way, a great team-building exercise. I know I'm advocating a somewhat expensive outing — and a logistically challenging one for those of you in remote areas — but I really believe that, in the long run, it pays off.

I also recommend that the staff attend restaurant trade shows. It's a great place to network and to find out what's new and innovative in the field. It helps them to keep current by participating in workshops and hearing panelists discuss important issues of the day. Encourage your staff to think of restaurant service as an honest and legitimate career. As in every other career, you become better and more comfortable as you become more experienced and knowledgeable. Managers, work with your staff to help them become educated through your guidance and direction. **NAC**

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