

SPECIAL GUESTS

SPECIAL NEEDS

by David Rothschild

Say "Special Guest" to a casino server and he'll immediately think "VIP." All casinos have guidelines for their service teams as to what degree of special treatment these "players" should receive. Some casino properties have as many as seven levels of VIP treatment, based on how much money the guest gambles. This can mean anything from an amuse bouche, to a personal visit from the chef, to a complete meal comp.

At some restaurants, as much as 70 percent or more of all guests receive some sort of special treatment. The restaurant staff knows how important this segment is to the casino and, for the most part, do a very good job of catering to these special guests. This is all necessary and part of the unique casino environment. But there's another category of special guests that are sometimes overlooked. I'm referring to those guests who, for one reason or another, require extra attention from the staff.

Let's start with seniors, a mainstay of all casinos. They need to be greeted and seated quickly. Hostesses should avoid seating them in an area that requires navigating steps or dodging obstacles. Match your walking pace to theirs so they can maintain contact with you. Choose a well-lit area, away from large groups of diners, if possible.

If a guest is using a wheelchair or a walker, ask if you can place it somewhere close by, where it won't be in the way of traffic. Have a penlight flashlight available if your room lighting is low. Offer a magnifying card if the guest is having difficulty reading the menu. Determine how many ways the check is to be split. Do this graciously. Always use your best language with seniors. Avoid "you guys" and other informalities. Treat them the way you would want your grandparents treated when they dine out.

When introducing the menu, make sure to point out any offerings that are very

spicy — many seniors have a problem digesting highly seasoned foods. Advise them to share an item you know is enormous and generally too much for a senior to eat. If your restaurant allows, offer to split the order in the kitchen on two plates. Of course, you have to tell the guest if there is a split-plate charge!

Children are another challenge. Booths are the best for seating families with young children; it helps to keep them contained. It's most important that you be patient and pleasant. Parents are very quick to note annoyance on the part of the server. Suggest a highchair or booster chair. If the child is young, inconspicuously move the salt, pepper and sugar. Greet the child pleasantly, but don't fuss over him. You don't want to be his playmate. Crayons and other distractions, if available, are terrific. Don't take the order from the child unless the parent asks you to do so. Bring crackers or some rolls and butter right away. Bring extra napkins and a smaller size beverage glass. Ask the parents if it would be alright to serve the child's food before the rest of the table is served.

As servers, we also have to be prepared to handle guests' special dietary restrictions and allergies. Diners who are diabetic, have religious restrictions or are on low-sodium or low-cholesterol regimens should be accommodated to the best of our ability. Know your menu. Speak with the kitchen so you're able to suggest specific menu items, or advise which menu items can be easily modified. Every restaurant has a small percentage of vegetarian guests. Without being intrusive, learn what sort of vegetarian the guest is. Is he vegan (meaning he only eats fruits, vegetables and grains)? Does he eat dairy products and/or eggs? It's much easier to make suggestions if you have these answers. A steamed vegetable plate is not always the best answer.

When a guest says he has allergies,

take this very seriously. Allergies are much different than likes and dislikes. Allergic reactions are potentially life threatening. Some of the more common food allergies are dairy, wheat (gluten), peanuts and shellfish. "I don't think that's in that dish," isn't good enough. You can't assume when answering a guest's questions about the presence of a specific ingredient in a preparation. Always check with the kitchen. Sometimes, as a server, you might not be aware that there's peanut oil in a dressing or that flour was used as a thickener in soup. Always check!

A special-needs category I serve up next for your consideration is the solo diner. Casino restaurants have one of the highest percentages in the industry of guests dining alone. Why is he important? That solo diner might eat by himself this time, but next time he may bring in a party of 20. Some restaurants offer a community or networking table as an option for solo diners. If it's available, make the guest aware of it. But never push it on him. Educate your staff to introduce people to one another as each new guest arrives at the table.

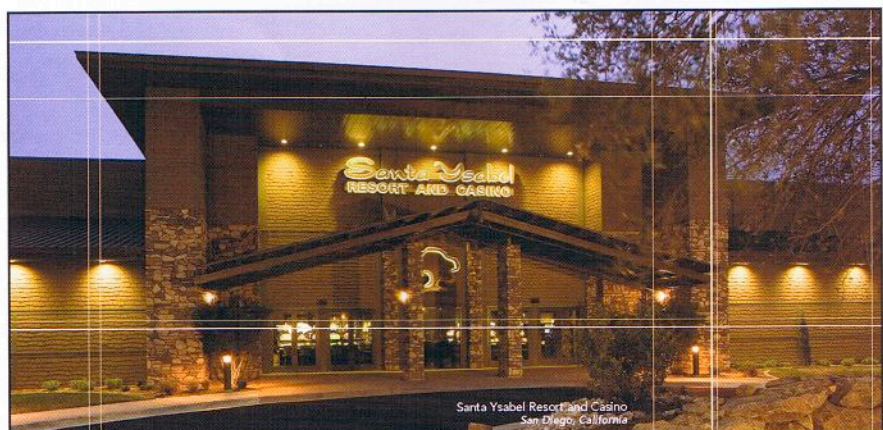
Never greet a solo diner with, "party of one?" It just doesn't sound like much of a party, does it? Seat single diners at deuces in nice areas of the restaurant. If there's a visual happening in the restaurant — like an oyster bar — seat the single diner there. You want him to feel welcome. Restaurants that have many business travelers who dine by themselves set a few very visible tables with just one setting. Always assign a really professional server — one who excels at quick reads — to wait on solo diners.

To cultivate this business

(and I assure you, it is very good business) be accommodating. Many solo diners would prefer to have several appetizers rather than an entree. Have a terrific by-the-glass wine selection. Feature wine or beer flights. Offer a small dessert sampler. Comp a dessert occasionally for a regular solo guest.

At your pre-shift meeting, bring up one of these categories of special-needs guests. Ask for input from your servers: "What suggestions or tips do you have for making the dining experience more pleasant for this group?" Many of your best servers are already using many of the techniques described. Let's get everyone on the same page and make dining at your restaurants special for everyone — not just the VIPs. **NAC**

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