

IS TEAM SERVICE RIGHT FOR YOUR RESTAURANT?

By David Rothschild

Question that comes up a lot when we meet with food and beverage directors, restaurant managers, and supervisors is, "Could you explain team service?" This is usually followed by, "How does it work? Who does what?" and "Should we be using team service?" Depending on the property and concept, we'll then discuss why they should — or shouldn't — institute this style.

To properly perform the more formal styles of service — Russian and French — a service team is really required. The team usually consists of at least a front waiter and a back waiter. Additional team members are added as the service to be provided becomes more specialized and intricate. I've been in charge of service teams that had as many as seven members: a captain, two front waiters, two back waiters and two bussers.

Let's define these positions and responsibilities: The captain is the senior server. His duties (or those of the front waiter, if there isn't a captain) include greeting guests, wine service, introducing the menu, taking the order, assisting in the food and beverage service, and presenting/servicing the check. The back waiter gathers all of the serving pieces, as required for service, and picks up the food. The busser is chiefly responsible for clearing and resetting tables, but the entire service team shares responsibility for this. It's often also a busser's duty to serve/replenish water and bread.

In Russian-style service, all food is fully prepared in the kitchen and artistically presented on silver platters that are delivered to the table, usually on a rolling wooden cart, by the back waiter. Hot plates are placed in front of each guest. Food is individually plated, according to the guest's choices, using a fork and spoon the way you would use tongs (referred to as "Frenching" in the restaurant industry). The captain will usually start with the protein, and the back waiter will follow with starch and vegetable.

French service is similar except that, where the food is

fully prepared by the kitchen in Russian service, here the food is partially prepared in the kitchen and then finished tableside on a gueridon (a quite costly, specialized piece of equipment with a built-in burner or burners). A note of caution: While many restaurants say they offer gueridon service, what they're actually using is a service cart topped with a portable burner. Yes, this is lower-cost, but it's also a potentially dangerous substitute.

EXAMPLES OF TYPICAL FRENCH TABLESIDE COOKING AND SERVICE

- Caesar or Wilted Spinach Salads: Dressings are prepared; salads are tossed
- Steak Diane or Shrimp Scampi: Fully prepared at table
- Chateaubriand or Rack of Lamb: Prepared in the kitchen and carved in dining room
- Duck: Cooked in the kitchen; flambéed at the table
- Fish, such as Dover Sole: De-boned and reassembled tableside
- Desserts, such as Crepes Suzette, Bananas Foster and Cherries Jubilee: Prepared and plated tableside

WHY SWITCH TO TEAM SERVICE?

One of the real advantages is that it allows one member of the team to be on the floor, visible and available to the guests at all times. Servers are there to greet guests promptly when they arrive at the table and are better able to anticipate guests' needs throughout the meal.

Guests feel pampered. Who wouldn't with a cadre of staff members attending to your every need? When properly executed, team service provides a more individualized, personalized service experience.

Team service builds teamwork. The concept requires that every team member be willing and able not only to perform his specific tasks, but jump in as necessary to assist his teammates. Many casino restaurants want to upgrade their image and offer some tableside preparations. They also want to do this quickly and efficiently so the guest can get back out onto

the gaming floor. The only logical way to make this happen is with a team service concept.

There are some things, though, that you need to keep in mind to make team service work. Staff personalities and levels of expertise can often be a stumbling block. When building a service team, you need to ensure that all of the members can work compatibly and that each carries a full share of the load. Partnering go-getters and slackers, or veterans and newbies, can be a recipe for disaster.

Staffing and scheduling for team service can be complicated. Under the best of circumstances, the service teams that typically work together will be scheduled together. But when a back waiter needs the night off, do you have another server who can step in and mesh with that team? Or, can one busser really handle a third or fourth service station if his counterpart doesn't show up? These are things you need to consider.

And it's important that, while all team members are responsible for the guests' dining experience, diners have some way of knowing who to go to when they need or want something. Use some distinguishing feature — different uniforms, job titles on name badges — to indicate what part of the service each team member provides.

As an alternative, we often recommend the concept of a food runner, rather than institution of a complete team concept. High-volume restaurants, especially those with a long distance from kitchen to dining room, can benefit from the simple addition of a food runner or runners. The food runner is a member of the front-of-house staff. He works with the expeditor (a member of the kitchen staff) to deliver food in a timely manner to the dining room. This server doesn't have a station of his own, but is responsible for delivering food to the proper tables. If the server isn't available, the runner then serves out the food, without auctioning it off. You know what that means: "Who gets the...?"

Nothing makes a restaurant look more amateurish than a food auction. Let's talk a little about that. When a server other than the one who took the order serves a guest the correct meal or beverage, the diner's amazed and impressed. It's like magic. How'd they do that? It makes the entire operation

look professional. To accomplish this, a system has to be taught and put into operation that ensures correct delivery of food. Most training manuals call this system "The Pivot." I've always known it as the "Seat Designation" system.

How does it work? In the simplest of terms, every table in a restaurant has a number and each seat at that table also has a number. When orders are taken and written, the seat number is indicated. Referencing the order ticket, anyone can help deliver the correct plate or beverage to the correct guest. Bussers can carry out drinks. Fellow servers can assist in serving large parties. A supervisor can carry out plates dragging in the kitchen — without standing around, wondering where they go.

Take a look at the systems you currently have in place. Maybe there's an opportunity to go to team service in one of your restaurants. **NAC**

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