

Waiter, Waitress, Busser and Hostess Training Manual.

EATiQuette's The Main Course on Table Service

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## Chapter 5

### **Fourteen qualities of every good server ~ and one all-important rule**

Waiters and waitresses come in all sizes, shapes and colors.

When I lived in New York many years ago, it was said that, at one time or another, everyone in the five boroughs had worked as a cab driver. I think that today, with the proliferation of restaurants, almost everyone has worked as a server sometime in his life.

So what qualities do you need to be successful in service?

**Reliable** - Be at your job every day. I taught for three years without taking one sick day. Since I worked for tips for so many years, my mindset was, “You don’t work, you don’t make any money.” It’s not like working in an office – you can’t have your “in-box” fill up and take care of it when you return the next day. If you aren’t there, *someone* is doing your job for you.

**Punctual** - Be on time. The dining room is going to open whether you’re there or not. A successful restaurant has to keep its posted hours. If you’re not there, *someone* is covering your station. Quickly, everything gets out of whack because somebody else is covering your tables, they

get overwhelmed, nobody knows who's in charge of which tables and the guests don't know who their server is.

**Cooperative** - Accept orders from your managers without arguing. Be willing to carry out tasks that have been assigned to you. Do your share of the work. Look for other tasks when you've finished yours. Try to get along with your co-workers (and remember . . . that includes the kitchen staff, too).

I'm often asked by human resource specialists to recommend an applicant for a service position. They rarely ask about technical skills. They want to know, "Does this person get along with fellow employees? Does he work well as part of a team? Is he able to accept criticism and grow from it? Can he keep an open mind?"

**Flexible** - Change is part of the business. Go with it. Sometimes you'll be asked to work extra hours; come in early, stay late. You may have to cancel plans because you've been called in to cover a shift for someone who's sick. You may show up one day and there's a new manager in charge, a new POS system has been installed, a new menu's in place. Be flexible. You can't always count on doing things the same way they've always been done – you need to adapt to the situation.

**Thorough** - Complete what you start. If a guest asks you to bring a birthday dessert for someone at the table, or asks a

question about a dietary concern, you have to make sure these requests are handled promptly. You can ask a fellow employee to help, but you're ultimately responsible to see that it's done.

**Organized** - Concentrate on what you're doing – stay focused. As a server, you're always juggling a number of tasks. Learn to prioritize. Decide what needs to be done first, and do it.

**Knowledgeable** - Product knowledge is essential to the successful server. Know what you're talking about. Familiarize yourself with the menu. Ask the chef questions. If possible, taste the food. Learn about methods of preparation and cooking times.

Read a newspaper or watch TV news. It's important that a guest feels you're intelligent and know what's going on in the world.

Respect the knowledge of other employees and learn from them.

Learn about the company history. Familiarize yourself with the layout of the property. Be able to answer basic customer questions: "Is there a phone I can use?" "Where are the restrooms?"

Be aware of all company policies and adhere to them.

**Ethical** - Be truthful and honest. If there are blanks on your résumé, explain them the best way that you can. If you've made a mistake at the table, it's not a crime. It happens. Accept responsibility and own up to your mistakes. Your reputation in this business starts with your first job. Giving away food and drinks, or taking property that doesn't belong to you, is wrong. No, the boss may not miss that set of salt and pepper shakers that you're using at home, but there's always a chance that it'll get back to him or a future employer.

**Sincere** - We've all had a waiter approach the table with a plastered on smile and a "radio DJ" voice. Don't assume a different identity when you wait tables. You are who you are. Be professional, but be yourself at the table.

**Loyal** – Be respectful of the restaurant where you're currently employed. Don't "bad mouth" current or former employers or co-workers. The restaurant community is very tight knit. Your words are likely to come back to haunt you later on in your career. Remember, today's busser is tomorrow's restaurant manager – and you may be looking for a job.

Always try to give sufficient notice before leaving a position. Management may decide to "show you the door" immediately (it's happened to me) still, you've done the right thing.

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**Ambitious** - Take initiative. Increase your knowledge of food and wine. Ask people in other jobs to teach you more about what they do – especially positions you might like to move into. Ask a server who makes good tips to give you some hints.

**Personable** - You have to *genuinely* like people to be a successful server. Be friendly, but not overly informal. We all have our bad days, but a good server is upbeat and cheerful and has a positive attitude.

**Sense of Humor** - A self-deprecating sense of humor can be a great asset. It has to be used sparingly, however. Inappropriate humor, or poorly timed humor can be disastrous. You never want to make the guest feel that he's the butt of your joke. I remember once early in my career, suggesting the lunch special of *Tongue Polonaise* to a guest. The guest replied, "*Me?* Eat something that came out of a cow's *mouth?*" My inappropriate comeback was, "So how did you enjoy your *eggs* this morning?" Neither he nor his guests was the least bit amused.

#### **Professional –**

*A good server doesn't dress in the dining room. Don't go onto the restaurant floor until you're fully dressed in uniform. When you're putting on your apron or tying your tie as the guests are arriving, it appears that you're not*

ready for them – that’s not very assuring for the diners. It’s also not a good idea for staff members (especially while still in uniform) to be drinking at the bar or sitting in the dining room while service is still going on. While I’m on this subject, always wear appropriate attire when arriving and departing the restaurant. You, as an employee, are a reflection of your work place.

*A good server doesn’t eat or chew gum on the job.* When you’re on duty in the restaurant, refrain from all food and beverage consumption. Chewing gum is inappropriate at *all times* in a restaurant.

*A good server doesn’t carry pencils behind the ear.* Or, for that matter, in the bun on top of your head! Don’t remove the cap from a pen with your teeth or chew on your pencil. Depending on your uniform, writing implements should be kept in your vest or apron. That includes check holders and order pads, too – *never* jam them into your waistband, no matter how many servers you see with them tucked above their butts.

*A good server is courteous.* Use “please” and “thank you” when addressing both guests and co-workers. “No problem” is *not* a substitute for “you’re welcome.” Always put the guests’ needs before your own. Give guests the right-of-way, even when you’re in a hurry.

*A good server is tactful.* I tell servers to “be like Pagliacci.” Remember that opera clown with a painted smile on his face? He was smiling on the outside but crying on the inside. Don’t share problems with guests – they’re in the restaurant to enjoy their meal, not to feel sorry for you. If you want to share anything, share the good stuff. Stay away from touchy subjects like politics and religion. Don’t argue with the customer. Never assume the relationship between guests (for example, don’t call a woman “Mrs.” unless you know, for a fact, that the couple is married – to each other). Don’t share information about one guest with another. *Never* correct a guests’ pronunciation of a food or wine. Don’t jump into the guests’ conversation – you’re not involved unless you’ve been asked to participate. Complaining or talking about guests while on the job is inappropriate. You never know who will hear and the conversation is likely to get back to the guest. A diner who overhears you talking about another guest has to wonder what you’re saying about *him* when he’s out of earshot.

There’s a line that separates server from guest – don’t step over it.

*A good server acts the part.* Be poised and well-groomed. Carry an air of confidence. Take charge of your guests’ dining experience. Make them feel comfortable and welcome, even in the most formal settings.





**Lawns aren't the only place you'll find weeds . . .**

*You need to drop the drinks at table 2. Table 6 is waiting to give you their dessert order. The entrées for table 3 are still sitting in the pick-up window, but you have to take appetizer orders at table 5 before you can go into the kitchen. This is known as being "in the weeds" ~ having to juggle too many tasks at too many tables. Maybe it's because you spent too much time talking to a guest; maybe you're just not working efficiently. I have a friend whose nickname is "Weeds" because he always seems to be behind when he's serving. Staying organized and prioritizing tasks will help you stay "out of the weeds."*

Avoid the appearance of being overwhelmed, though there are times when you will be. I recall working one evening when a water pipe burst in the kitchen. There must have been two inches of water on the floor. The guests didn't need to know about it – it wasn't their problem.

Do everything in a quiet and unrushed manner.

*A good server is a good communicator.* Develop a good speaking voice and a good command of the language. Don't use big words just for the sake of using them. Incorrect word usage is just plain embarrassing. Use words that you're familiar with.

*A good server greets guests properly.* Don't address guests by first name unless they specifically ask you to do so. Avoid slang and informality.

In formal situations, address guests as gentlemen or ladies; sir or madam (or ma'am) – *not* “folks.” Say “Welcome,” or “Good evening,” not “Hi, how are ya?”

*A good server keeps conversation with guests to a minimum.* Be able to break off a conversation. This isn't always easy to do, but it's an important skill to learn. “Please excuse me, I'll be back in a minute. I have to check on an order.” When guests see you spending too much time at one table, they think they're being neglected. Try to divide your time equally among your tables.

*A good server doesn't speak in a loud voice, or quarrel with fellow employees.* This is just unprofessional and can be upsetting for the guests. If you have the need to air grievances, do it outside, away from the dining room. If you can't resolve the problem, ask a manager to step in.

*A good server is conscious of body language.* Be aware of what your posture and movements say to others. We convey a lot of things without actually saying them. A graceful stride and stance indicate self-confidence and professionalism to the guest. But when your hands are in your pockets or you lean against the wall or chairs at the table, you're making a different statement to the guest and to management. You're saying that you'd rather be anywhere but here. You're bored.

Don't slouch at the table. Stand straight, leaning slightly forward to take a guest's order. A typical "at ease" posture for a server is hands clasped behind the back, attentive, with an "I'm here if you need me" look.

A server in an adjacent station asked me why, night after night, I always made better tips than he did. I asked him to examine his body language. He would approach the guest to take the order with his arms crossed in front of him. I mentioned to him that a crossed-armed stance was a very defensive posture. It says to the guest, "Don't give me a hard time, just give me your order."

*A good server is always on the alert.* You have to keep your eyes on your station, even when you're involved in a conversation. There's nothing wrong with conversing in a low tone with a fellow server, but you need to keep an eye on your station at all times. As a manager, I know that my servers aren't doing their jobs when guests are waving their hands all over the dining room! Don't stand in groups and *please*, don't congregate at the hostess or maître d' stand.

*A good server never appears to be rushed or angry.* There are times when you'll be both. The restaurant business can be frustrating and trying. But remember Pagliacci? Keep that smile on your face! Your guests don't need to know that you just spent five minutes screaming back and forth with the chef. Running in the dining room, kicking the

kitchen door and slamming dishes into the bus box aren't going to make the situation any better.

The most important thing to remember as a server is this:  
***Never do anything that makes a guest feel uncomfortable, stupid or clumsy!***

Now you're thinking and acting like a pro, but do you *look* like one?

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