

# SERVICE NOT INCLUDED?

A tacit understanding between server and guest has been altered.

BY JOHN KESSLER

TWO NIGHTS BEFORE THANKSGIVING, I brought a boisterous seven-top into HaiSous, a modern Vietnamese restaurant in Chicago run by a noted chef named Thai Dang. The waiter managed to quiet my loud clan enough to get our drink orders and brought them in good time. After a couple of prods encouraging us to order food, he took command of the conversation, sussing out the family vibe better than most of the boyfriends my kids have brought home. Better yet, he had a plan. He heard every corner of the table mention whole fish, so we needed two of those. Also: both noodle dishes, all the veggies, and whichever small plates people wanted to call out. The non-cocktail drinkers had mostly chosen the same glass of wine for the first round, so, a bottle for the second?

The meal was it: the quality restaurant time we'd been needing for the past two years. It was like a great night from the Beforetimes, when my family, friends, and readers all felt so passionately about going out to eat. What was the best? The chili-tamarind crab noodles? The grilled eggplant? Honestly, the food was all great. And the service was flat-out amazing.

Such experiences for me are now uncommon.

In part, it's because expensive restaurant fare has become less necessary since quarantine made me a better mixer of craft cocktails and shucker of oysters. But I wonder if the main difference I'm noticing is in service. It's like a tacit understanding between server and guest has been altered.

"It was so invisible and baked into the experience before," John deBary, cofounder of the Restaurant Workers' Community Foundation, told me, "The reason to go to a restaurant isn't consuming nutrition, but to be taken care of."

Like most restaurant critics, I never gave this basic truth enough credence. I'd prattle on in detail about food but would expect service to be on point. Sometimes it was because I was recognized and didn't want anyone to think I was the kind of "influencer" who demanded special treatment. Sometimes it was because smooth service (like good writing) looks easy and effortless, when really it's an exercise in juggling skills, knowledge, and calculations.

Yet I did write about service more than most critics. Often, I'd "go to the bathroom" so I could stand somewhere out of sight lines and watch. First I'd try to figure out the big picture. Was there a floor manager? Were there captains and

Illustrations by Molly Brooks





assistant waiters, or waiters and bussers, or just waiters? Did servers have to run their own plates from the kitchen, or were there food runners?

Then I'd look for faults. Were wine and water glasses empty? Did servers stop by tables holding other people's dirty plates en route to the kitchen? Did they deliver food to the wrong tables? Was the timing off on busy nights, leaving some guests grumpy and foodless while others had their entrees dropped right after appetizers?

Finally, the intangibles: Did the room have good energy? Did the waiters work as a team? Did they read the customers well and adjust their banter and interactions accordingly? Did they make their guests feel taken care of?

While it'll probably piss off everyone in the industry who reads this, I just don't feel as well taken care of these days. A few examples from the past year: I arrived at a fast-casual spot before closing time and found the staff breaking down. Not even an "I'm sorry." The waiter at a mid-level restaurant took forever to greet us and then so thoroughly misidentified every dish it was clear he was spitballing. At a very expensive tasting-menu spot, a server had to consult his notes to describe the artistry behind a torturous-looking, slate-and-metal serving piece but forgot to tell me about the blob of mystery food on it. I think it was fish.

At many restaurants, service has become mechanical. You pull up a QR code-enabled menu on your device, the waiter arrives masked and distanced, and you order.

I know that eating out—having someone cook your food, bring that food to you, and then do your dishes—is a privilege. One that I've perhaps learned to take for granted during the past ten or fifteen years when I, and a hell of a lot of other Americans, had begun dining out as often as we cooked at home. (One Nielsen report found that the amount of money Americans spent in restaurants nearly doubled between 2003 and 2018.) There was never a shortage of small, new, chef-driven places to check out.

The early months after quarantine were marked by an upheaval in dining, and chefs were called out for creating abusive work environments—a new chapter of racial, gender, and class-based reckonings that further unsettled the country in 2020. Front-of-house restaurant workers figure

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prominently in what psychologist Anthony Klotz termed “the Great Resignation,” the decision by 47.4 million Americans to call it quits on unfulfilling jobs in 2021. As Atlanta restaurant server Molly Belviso puts it, “Everyone who could possibly get out got out. The only people who are left now are the waiters making \$100,000 a year or the people like me with a side hustle.” (She sells gifts and crafts when not waiting tables.)

If she’s right, what next?

Belviso explained that those who’ve decided to stay in the service sector and those who’ve decided to join it, lured by lucrative signing bonuses and benefits, aren’t bound by the same unspoken rules of good service. “We’ve gotten rid of that idiot ‘the customer is always right’ model the industry did to itself,” she says.

That dictum, coined by department store owner Harry Gordon Selfridge in the early 1900s, became a foundational principle for what restaurateur Danny Meyer would term “enlightened hospitality” a century later in his bestselling book, *Setting the Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business*. In brief, Meyer argued that good hospitality elicits an emotional response from guests. “The service is the technical delivery of a product. Hospitality is how the delivery of that product makes its recipient feel,” he writes. Published in 2006, the book had a profound effect on both young people entering the industry and those training them.

For deBary, just embarking on his career as a bartender with the Momofuku Group, it was like a bible. But in an op-ed published last year in *Food & Wine*, he argued it was time to rethink Meyer’s philosophy of hiring workers with “emotional intelligence” who thrive on caring for others. When I spoke to deBary, he explained that it created a norm where servers had to “capitulate to every desire of the guests. Maybe it was true to an extent, but it got kind of weaponized and went from this rarefied luxury to something expected.” (Or, in Belviso’s words, “Fine dining had become about how much abuse you can take with grace.”)

By the mid-2010s, the tipping system that had long provided the wages and rewards for good service was coming into question. Until then, most restaurants took a “tip credit” that allowed them to pay front-of-house workers only a little more than \$2 per hour with the assumption that most of their wages came in tips. Sure, servers could leave on good nights with a wad of cash, but the problems inherent in the system were rife. Back-of-house workers felt like poorly paid, second-class citizens; women and people of color routinely earned less; and restaurants that pooled tips often engaged in wage theft. When the New York restaurant Sushi Yasuda did away with tipping in 2013, it was big enough news to make *The New York Times*. By 2015, Danny Meyer implemented a no-tipping policy in all his restaurants, raising prices accordingly to recapture the lost income. Many others followed suit. The reservation platform Tock permitted clients to build a 20 percent tip into the prepaid price of dinner.

It was a confusing time. Customers hated no-tipping policies because they liked to reserve the right to reward and punish servers. (As someone who drinks a lot of water during a salty restaurant meal, I can remember feeling peevish when my glass sat empty in the face of an autogratiuity.) Waiters hated it because their best overtippers were discouraged from dropping that spare C-note. In other words, the service model was already deeply frayed by the time the pandemic dealt its blow.

Also, front-of-house work had become too all-encompassing. No one had a life. Bree Schaffer, who worked in service at the now-shuttered, Michelin three-star restaurant Grace in Chicago, says that fine-dining restaurants “expected you to commit your life to them. There was this ‘family mentality’ in workplaces. We only hung out with each other, and we had our days off together.”

“People are waking up to things they thought were standard but now see as absurd,” says deBary. “You could have a fever of 104 but have to come into work. You had to be on all the time.”

Staffers who continued working through the lockdowns and the shifting directives and rules regarding contact felt “more empowered to make their boundaries clear,” says Schaffer, now general manager at a private club and coworking space. They are more demanding about what shifts and stations they’ll work, and what degree of contact they are willing to make with guests.

Those who did return to floor service after the spring 2020 quarantine found a changed world. “When we first opened, it seemed like we were going into battle,” recalls Atlanta restaurant manager John McDaniels. At the time he was working at Two Urban Licks, a cavernous place with a young, heavy-drinking crowd. “They didn’t care about the mask thing, they didn’t care about the social distancing thing,” he says. “It was always a battle between you and the guest.”

Many servers reported that their tips decreased during that time. “People tipped a lot less when you have your mask on. It all felt kind of robotic. You were there to take their order, drop their plates, and leave,” says Elizabeth Campbell, a server at Pricci in Atlanta.

“People were going into shock about things,” says Belviso. “They couldn’t understand why a restaurant wasn’t grateful to drop everything and service them two minutes before close. So many are even more entitled and demanding than they were before the pandemic.”

She recalls one night when she was running around taking care of three stations and a guest chided her for taking too long to make contact with his table. “Y’all should hire some more staff,” he said. “Absolutely, sir,” Belviso responded. “Can I send you an application?”

WHEW. IN THE COURSE of reporting this story, I have shifted from feeling ready to tear into the busted norms to eating at least an amuse-bouche portion of crow. Now I feel like a jerk for complaining above about staffers taking too long to greet me, about restaurants not serving me when I arrive a few minutes before close, and about the impersonal nature of socially distant service. I am so not always right.

But I had one last service professional to speak with: John Doo, the server who made my family dinner at HaiSous so memorable. A ten-year

veteran of Chicago fine dining, he has seen many colleagues hang up their aprons.

“A lot of the core members, the lifers, the true professionals, have grown tired of the industry and are looking for a way out,” he says. “Every night we’re just trying to make sure we’re staffed up and we can get through our shifts. But so many staffers are younger and green now.”

Doo notes that fewer servers try, or even know how, to upsell. They haven’t learned to read their guests. (And, yes, we did get a second bottle of wine.)

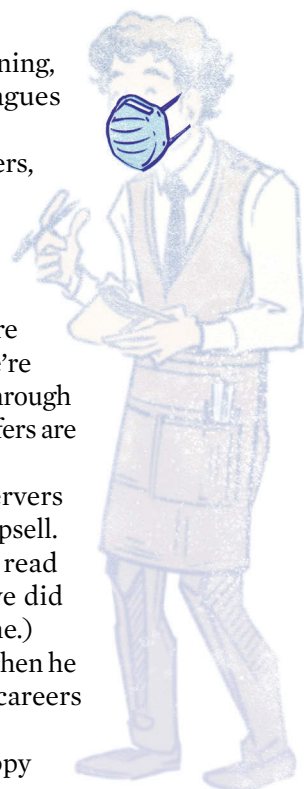
Did he have a moment when he thought about changing careers after the lockdown?

“To be honest, I was happy to be back,” he said. “No one is forcing you to be here.”

Good on you, sir.

In my life, I’ve performed just about every duty one can in a restaurant. Let me be honest. I am a clumsy person with poor motor skills, and I’ve dropped trays in the most spectacular fashion. As a busser I was always being yelled at for not moving fast enough. As a waiter, I learned that I did have a few talents. Guests liked me, and I was commended for good wine sales. But I too often got behind in my work and let plates languish under the heat lamps, earning the ire of most chefs I worked with. I did better once I moved to the kitchen, because I could hustle behind the line in a way I couldn’t on the floor. My specials were good to great, and I could reliably cook meat to temperature. I was less successful as a head chef because of poor time management and organizational skills, though I was a mentoring boss for young cooks who wanted to learn.

All these jobs honored me. My life was a mess when I worked in restaurants, but I felt the calling. I believed it was a gift to be able to prepare food for people and serve it to them. I still do. When I walk into restaurants, that’s what I hope to see. 🍷



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