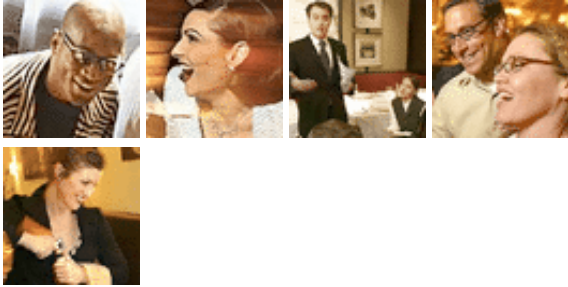


## New house rules Modern maitre d's welcome diners back to the table

- Kim Severson, Chronicle Staff Writer

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The problem started two courses into a meal at Masa's. A friend was in town, and we planned to spend all evening eating Ron Siegel's Japanese-inspired French food.

As our plates of seared scallops arrived, so did a wall of perfume from a woman being seated at the next table. Siegel's delicate seafood was lost in a cloud of Chanel.

Maitre d' Marino Monferrato, a charming 32-year-old Italian who rides a motorcycle to work, glided by and noticed both the smell and our discomfort. "Would you like to move?" he whispered.

Caught between enduring the perfume or hastily shifting to a new table, we succumbed to politeness and decided to stay put.

Then Monferrato took control. In a flash, he tipped over the small vase of roses on our table. Water spread across the damask.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so clumsy. Let me seat you at another table."

It was an inspired maitre d' move in a city where poor service has become the most frequent diner complaint.

Monferrato is one of a small but growing number of young front-of-the-house personalities who are about as far away from modern-day menu jockeys as you can get. These aren't the older, European-influenced maitre d's who intimidated your parents and made places like L'Etoile and Ernie's hum 30 years ago. The new maitre d's are younger, decidedly hipper and more diverse than ever before. And they know what it takes to please a generation of equally young, experienced diners who have grown up on good service but want it dished out in a more casual way.

Call them service managers, maitre d's or even the chef's spouse, they are beginning to take back the dining room just when the industry needs it most, say several restaurateurs.

"They're not the guy in the tuxedo any more, but you're seeing restaurants with really interesting people on the floor who are happy as hell when you get there and want you to have a great time," says Doug Washington, a 38-year-old maitre d' who has supervised the front of the house at top-drawer restaurants like Jardinière and Postrio, and now sets the tone at the more casual Town Hall South of Market.

### Service revolution

The front of the house -- once the domain of larger-than-life maitre d's or showmen restaurant owners -- has for the past 20 years been given over to general managers who are choked with paperwork, anonymous hosts who disappear as soon as the menus are handed out, and a style of service dictated more by company policy than the rules of hospitality.

"The back of the house over the last 25 or 30 years has gone through a revolution," says Tim Zagat, the New York-based co-founder of the popular restaurant guides. With the rise of celebrity chefs and an emphasis on increasingly innovative food, the front of the house has become the weak link in the industry.

"The front of the house needs that same kind of revolution," he says. Gone are the days when great maitre d's

might save the day, as one did when Zagat was eating at the now-closed Pazo in midtown Manhattan. A waiter spilled a full glass of red wine all over him. Within five minutes the maitre d' brought a new white shirt to the table, exactly fitting Zagat's generous proportions.

Such moments of great service are few and far between today, Zagat says. Service irritates diners more than any other aspect of eating out, according to Zagat Guide's 2004 survey of diners at 1,220 restaurants nationwide. That showed an average of 74 percent of all complaints are related to service.

Restaurants that don't polish up the front of the house in the coming years could easily fold, warns Hudson Riehle, a senior vice president at the National Restaurant Association. The association's 2004 industry forecast predicts a renewed emphasis on service.

Diners long for a more personal touch, for the kind of relationship they might have enjoyed with old-school maitre d's -- but with a modern sensibility, Zagat and others say.

Essentially, diners want to feel special again.

And that's just what the new breed is doing at several restaurants across the Bay Area. Relatively formal restaurants like Fifth Floor, the Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton, and Masa's have maitre d's who meld a traditional European service style with a looser, more personal and often irreverent touch. Others at more casual spots merge expert but informal floor service with business acumen, becoming both managers and touchstones for customers. Larry Bain at Acme Chophouse, John Jasso at Tablespoon, Lindsay Tusk at Quince, Jocelyn Hoar at Charles Nob Hill and Shelley Lindgren at A16 are but a few of the new breed.

So is Michael Hutchings, a 30-something maitre d' and manager who fronts Fonda, the popular Nuevo Latino small-plates restaurant in Albany, and who also works Fonda's quieter sister restaurant, Lalime's. At Lalime's, with its slightly older crowd and more subdued food, Hutchings wears conservative clothes and glasses. At Fonda, the Elvis Costello eyewear comes out, a suede shirt goes on and the music goes up.

"Young or old, they want the same level of service. They just want it delivered differently," he says. "The diner today is a little more talkative, a little more relaxed. Younger customers grew up eating out, so they know what to expect."

And while a modern maitre d' can still run out to find a perfect bottle of wine for a favored customer and knows when to comp a dessert or save a great table for a regular, he or she possesses a new set of skills that can accommodate a more diverse set of diners.

Reflect the community

"We're going to have gay clientele, we're going to have people of color come in. Our staff and our service have to reflect that," Hutchings says, recalling two women who came to Lalime's, clearly celebrating an anniversary. And old-school maitre d' might not have mentioned it or might not have noticed the women were a lesbian couple.

"We bought them a glass of Champagne and comped a dessert," he says. "They have been regulars ever since."

In an era of casual, clubby restaurants that hover between fine dining and neighborhood hang-out, giving the customers someone at the door who knows them -- or at least pretends to know them -- matters more than ever.

"That hasn't changed, even with the young people we see coming in," says Town Hall's Washington. "There is something about that connection that you get when you first walk in that is really special. And there aren't many places in the world where you can get it any more."

Washington might fiddle with the lights and music a dozen times during the night, depending on how the mood of the room changes. He'll notice the lone carnivore at a table of fish eaters and offer a glass of red wine to counter the bottle of white on the table. He'll roam the room looking for a nervous first-date couple that needs help breaking the ice.

"The mistake I've seen at restaurants is that they have managers who are so focused on having an amazing wine list or being organizationally perfect and having all their costs in line or just seating people and running food, no one is out on the floor making people feel like there is a real face to the place -- a human element, someone looking after them other than their server," he says.

New customers, new rules

Greeting old friends and keeping tabs on new customers has consumed Shelley Lindgren, 32, ever since she opened A16 in San Francisco's Marina District in February. She learned her craft at the more formal Fleur de Lys and later at Bacar. Although she was mentored by old-school maitre d's, the game has changed.

"It's not about, 'Here's 20 bucks for that table you were going to give someone else,' any more. And the formal dress code went out in the dot-com days," she says. "Dining styles have changed altogether."

For much of America's dining history, the maitre d' hotel was the power position in a restaurant.

In the days when most fancy restaurants had some version of Continental cuisine and the menus themselves were almost as big as a daily newspaper, the maitre d' was the star of the dining room. He -- the maitre d' was always male -- knew which drink to serve regulars, who to seat where, and exactly how to debone a fillet of sole or flambe crepes Suzette.

For average diners in the late 1960s and 1970s, the impervious maitre d' was a symbol of how intimidating the experience could be. By the late 1980s, when American Express and VISA removed the designated captain's tipping line from credit card receipts and chefs began to move into the spotlight, the European-style maitre d' became a caricature.

Food and money changed things, says Nick Peyton, long one of California's best maitre d's and now co-owner of the casual Market in St. Helena.

Like Zagat, Peyton says the change came when the emphasis in dining shifted from the front of the house to the back. Dishes that used to be prepared tableside fell out of fashion. And places like Chez Panisse replaced Continental cuisine with California cuisine. But a shift in who controlled the tips also helped dig the grave. In the 1970s, restaurants started to unionize and waiters began keeping their own tips instead of giving them to the maitre d' to dole back to the staff.

"He was not the almighty god anymore," Peyton says.

A maitre d' job became a stepping stone. As restaurants became more corporate, the general manager or food and beverage manager became the coveted position. The art of the job was lost.

Giancarlo Paterlini, an owner of San Francisco's Acquerello, says it is easier to provide the sort of service that makes a restaurant warm and welcoming if you have a batch of regulars to work with.

"Used to be even as late as mid-'80s there were more regular diners who were really faithful," he says. "People tend to hop around now, trying the newest and trendiest."

That's just what the new breed of maitre d' hopes to stop. The mix of intuition, food and wine knowledge, a desire to please the customer, and a better appreciation of today's diner has revived the maitre d's place in the dining room.

Live to serve

A love of service is why Keith Fergel, 28, moved from the French Laundry to a job as maitre d' at the Fifth Floor. He had been a sommelier at the Yountville restaurant until August.

Owner Thomas Keller had talked to him about joining him in New York to work the wine program at Keller's new Per Se, the most anticipated restaurant opening of the year. Instead, Fergel chose service.

Fergel makes a point to keep things honest, calm and as personal as possible. He describes dishes in English, eschewing the French names his chef uses. He uses the sort of intuition inherent in the makeup of every good maitre d' to know if a customer isn't pleased with a dish but is too afraid to say it, or if someone is intimidated by the Fifth Floor's impressive wine list. He can even tell when a customer is lost on the way to the bathroom.

"As a maitre d', you're able to hook up with the customer on an emotional level. You're empowered to step out of policy so you can really do the craft of service," he says. "It's about looking people in the eyes and understanding what they need and giving it to them."

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Saving the day / Great moments from the front of the house

The Scene: The Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton, San Francisco

The maitre d': Nick Peyton (now at Market in St. Helena)

The problem: A high society regular, known for being a tough, demanding customer, was dining with a big party. She seemed a little out of it on this particular night. The entrees arrived and she flew into a fit. The waiter called Peyton to the table, where the woman was indignant.

"You have served us our main courses and I haven't had my salad!"

"Nick," whispered the waiter, "I brought the salad." She had already eaten it. The other people at the table diverted their glances. No help there.

The solution: Peyton returned the entrees to the kitchen and apologized to the customer. The waiter brought her a salad and Peyton asked the table to let him know when they would like their entrees. They said to bring them out right away, so refreshed entrees returned to the table within minutes of being removed and everyone was happy. The woman called the next day to apologize, saying she had been on new medication.

The Scene: Aqua

The maitre d': Bob Davis

The problem: A fellow who planned to propose to his fiance wanted to put the ring in the restaurant's famed lobster potpie. But it was Sunday night, the restaurant was out of lobster and no other nearby restaurants had any, either.

The solution: Davis drove to a nearby market where the seafood counter with a lobster tank was closed for the night. The checkout clerk told Davis he was welcome to the lobsters if he could get them out of the tank. Davis pushed up the sleeves of his black Valentino couture suit, fished out four lobsters and shoved them in a paper bag, driving them, kicking, back to Aqua. The chef prepared the potpie, the question was popped and the woman said yes.

The Scene: Masa's

The maitre d': Marino Monferrato

The problem: A party of 14 was in the wine cellar for a private party. One of the guests, who drank too much during the multicourse dinner, passed out, hitting his head and losing his dinner all over the floor.

The solution: Another person in the party took the man to the hospital. Monferrato moved the rest of the group upstairs for coffee and then went downstairs and cleaned up the mess himself.

"It's not all glamour to be a maitre d'," he says. "Sometimes you have to roll your sleeves up and do it because the restaurant is your home."

The party hosts, terribly embarrassed, tipped big and still come back as regulars.

-- Kim Severson

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## How to be a maitre d' at your own dinner party

Hospitality is an art, so practice it the next time you have a dinner party. These tips from the Bay Area's best maitre d's will make your guests feel comfortable. To be a good maitre d', throw out the notion that someone is right and someone is wrong. Your guests are right, period. No arguments, no power struggles. Your job, as host, is to figure out how to make them happy.

-- Decide what kind of experience you want your guests to have ahead of time and think about how to provide that. Do you want them to be pampered the whole night? Make sure all of your tasks are done ahead of time so you can simply serve. Conversely, if you want guests to participate in cooking or drink mixing, have stations set up so people can easily get in on the tasks.

-- Create the ambience. Light candles, arrange some cozy seating clusters and set out napkins or other items guests might need while they nibble snacks or have drinks. Have the dinner table set and ready.

-- Your house should be tidy but look a little lived-in so that when you open the door, people immediately feel comfortable. Welcome your guests as if they were family.

-- Be in charge. The idea is to avoid making guests guess what they should be doing. For example, don't leave them standing in the entrance when you take their coats to another room. Instead, ask them to have a seat in the living room where people will have appetizers before moving to the dining room.

-- Be specific. A big part of service is helping people make decisions. Don't ask, "Do you want cocktails?" People might be too shy to ask specifically for something. Instead, say "I'm having a martini, but I've made some blood orange margaritas and we also have a lovely chilled bottle of Champagne."

-- Prepare a special treat. If you know guests like a particular kind of wine or a special dish, have it on hand, then say something like, "I know you like my panna cotta, so I made some just for you."

-- Be sensitive to the flow of the party. If guests gather in the kitchen before dinner even though you preferred them in the living room, let it go and find a way to make people comfortable while you finish cooking.

-- Watch for the wallflower. Have something to do for the bored child or the guest who doesn't know anyone else. Buy a disposable camera and ask them to help document the party, or have a simple, fun task ready, or have them help you act as bartender.

-- Relax. Imagine how you would want to feel and treat your guests exactly that way.

-- K.S.

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