

[Home](#) » [Restaurants USA Magazine](#) » [2001](#) » [August](#) » [Article](#)

The Modern Maitre D'

- [About RUSA](#)
- [Archives](#)

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Providing superior service can give your restaurant a competitive edge in today's marketplace. Whether or not your restaurant employs a maitre d'hotel, there are many lessons to be learned from these masters of the fine art of service.

By Ira Apfel

The customer handed Alfonso De Lucia a diamond necklace and diamond bracelet for safekeeping. "They're a surprise for my wife," the guest said. It was not an unusual request for De Lucia, executive maitre d'hotel at Brasserie Jo in Boston.

After he returned the jewelry to the customer, the diner casually told De Lucia that the diamond set was worth more than \$200,000. "I almost fainted at the time," recalls De Lucia with a laugh. "But the gentleman said, 'Alfonso, you're the only person I can trust them with.'"

The VIP's faith was the ultimate testimony to De Lucia's reputation as one of the finest maitres d'hotel in the business. It also illustrates the important role maitres d'hotel play in restaurants. Despite the rise of casual dining, maitres d'hotel--those bastions of traditional, formal fine cuisine--continue to thrive, managing the front of the house with aplomb and making every guest feel special.

Maitres d'hotel are thriving for another reason. In an era of heightened competition, providing flawless service can set a restaurant apart. Whether your restaurant has a maitre d'hotel or not, the lessons that can be learned from these service superstars can help to take your service to the next level and win a legion of loyal customers.

Service fit for a king

The traditional maitre d'hotel image conjures up visions of European-born and -trained gentlemen, dressed in tuxedos and fluent in several languages, acting as regally as the aristocrats they serve. The traditional maitre d'hotel carried himself like royalty, because he did work for royalty, says Giuseppe G.B. Pezzotti, a senior lecturer of Food and Beverage Management with Cornell University's Hotel School in Ithaca, New York.

The phrase "maitre d'hotel" is French for "master of the hotel," and the position dates back several centuries. "Historically, you needed many years of

experience to become a maitre d'hotel," says Pezzotti, who trained in restaurant and hospitality management in Europe. "People would have to die before you reached the position and when you did, you would be in your late 40s or mid-50s."

Maitres d'hotel of old were renaissance men. They knew music, history, finance and politics. "They had to be diplomats because they were dealing with royalty," says Pezzotti.

Maitres d'hotel lost their wealthy patrons after the French Revolution overthrew the aristocracy, so they opened restaurants with the unemployed royal chefs and their brigade of workers (the French aristocracy's kitchen was modeled on the military, says Pezzotti). At the time, only wealthy people--presumably those who had usurped the aristocracy's societal role--could afford to dine in restaurants, so the maitres d'hotel and kitchen staff followed the nouveau riche to their seasonal homes, which meant summers in Monte Carlo and winters in St. Moritz, Switzerland.

Maitres d'hotel first appeared in America at the beginning of the 20th century to accommodate wealthy European visitors. The first and most famous American maitre d' hotel was Oscar Tschirky, who studied under legendary French chef Auguste Escoffier and worked at The Waldorf-Astoria in New York City. "Oscar of the Waldorf," as he was known, was so famous and worldly that he became almost as recognizable as the members of the Algonquin Round Table, the literary circle of famous authors, including Dorothy Parker and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who met at the Waldorf's Algonquin restaurant.

Maestros of stellar service

Many of today's top maitres d'hotel still come from Europe and maintain the traditional values. Dmitri Dmitrov is one such maitre d'hotel. Dmitrov, who works at Diaghilev, a Franco-Russian restaurant in West Hollywood's Wyndham Bel Age Hotel, got his start busing tables in London as an 18-year-old. He trained to be a maitre d'hotel in Bermuda and then at The Ritz-Carlton in Montreal, where he served many important politicians and wealthy people before working at Diaghilev.

Maitres d' hotel oversee front-of-the-house operations. As a result, they are sometimes referred to as general managers or even head waiters. They manage guest relations at the hostess stand, facilitate orders in the kitchen, ensure that service runs smoothly--neither too fast nor too slow--cater to the special needs of long-time guests and make new customers feel like old friends. In other words, the maitre d'hotel's primary duty is setting the standard of customer service, says Dmitrov. "Service is at its best whenever you don't ask for service," he says. "When it's choreographed properly, the client never has to ask or raise a hand for anything."

The maitres d'hotel of the 21st century tend to have a less-traditional background than their predecessors. For example, Andrew Ferlazzo, maitre d'hotel at Prince Michel de Virginia Restaurant and Suites in Leon, Virginia, caddied for a professional golfer before turning to the restaurant industry. And Rowland Hill, general manager and de facto maitre d'hotel at The Caucus Room in Washington DC, worked with Planet Hollywood after a stint in advertising. "The transition from advertising to restaurants was actually very easy," says Hill. "In advertising and restaurants, you deal with clients."

No American culinary or hospitality-management school has a major for those who wish to become a maitre d'hotel; however, a few offer courses related to the profession. At The Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in Hyde Park, New York, each student must serve as maitre d'hotel as part of a five-course requirement in customer service, which includes working in four student-

staffed restaurants. The CIA also offers graduate fellowships for students who wish to learn more about being a maitre d'hotel, says Jeff Levine, media-relations coordinator.

The demands of the maitre d'hotel position require long hours at the restaurant. A typical working day for Dmitrov begins at 2 p.m. with a one-hour meeting with the general manager of Diaghilev to review the past day's efforts and note any special concerns for the coming meal. From 3 to 4:30 p.m., he oversees the preparations of the dining room for that evening. Diaghilev opens at 6:30 p.m., at which time Dmitrov moves from table to table greeting diners and ironing out any wrinkles in service. By 2 a.m. Diaghilev has closed, but Dmitrov is still going. He uses this time to finish paperwork and handle other projects that could not be addressed during dinner. He usually leaves at 3 a.m. Dmitrov is so devoted to his profession that he visits Diaghilev on his days off. "The hours are long, but I'm very competitive and I like to be the best maitre d' possible," he says.

Unforgettable service

Maitres d'hotel say the key to flawless customer service is learning the tastes and special needs of every customer and instantly recalling them when the client returns. "I kind of have a memory bank," says De Lucia.

"I never have to write anything down. A customer will come in for two weeks and I'll tell his waiter, 'Beefeater martini in a special glass with ice on the side.'" How did De Lucia develop a memory that can recall hundreds of guests' tastes? "There's no secret," he says. "You just have to practice."

Dmitrov prefers to write down clients' likes and dislikes. He spends hours on his days off poring over the reservations so he'll know which VIP client will return and what the staff should do to welcome him or her. He recounts that a guest once gave her publicity photo to him. "I asked my hostess and she told me she was a famous movie star," says Dmitrov, who won't name names. "She thought they got great service because of who she was, but I didn't know her. Whether there's Jack Nicholson and Warren Beatty at one table and a doctor at another table, our service is always excellent."

Hill has gone high-tech and started entering The Caucus Room's customer information into a computer. "We have a new software package that stores everything from the guests' credit card into a data file," he says. When the patron returns, Hill prints out the information and circulates it among staff.

When a VIP enters the restaurant, Hill is ready. He notifies his staff to take special care of the customer, such as having her special cocktail ready before she is seated. As the guest's meal proceeds, Hill will check on the staff members to make sure they have catered to the VIP's every need.

Memorable moments

Maitres d'hotel must become adept at handling every customer request as well as difficult or unusual incidents. Naturally, every maitre d' is a treasure trove of anecdotes.

"Once, I was serving a party of movie stars and one of them asked for fried chicken," says De Lucia. "So, we made him fried chicken," even though it wasn't on the menu. De Lucia has even acted as a barber for a customer. "This person was an elderly, famous judge," he recalls. "He was in a great hurry and he forgot to go to the barber. I said, 'Come with me to the bathroom,' and I got my shaving kit."

Hill regularly caters to at least 61 celebrity clients: the politicians, lobbyists

and other wheeler-dealers who own The Caucus Room. "To be honest, it is relatively easy, because they know what they like and it's our job to provide them what they like," he says. "They are less demanding than some general customers."

Ted Balestreri, past National Restaurant Association chairman of the Board and president of the Sardine Factory in Monterey, California, recalls some of the unique challenges he had to handle when he worked as a maitre d'hotel in various California restaurants from the time he was 18. "In the 1960s, streakers thought it was humorous to run through the restaurant. Sometimes holding them until the officials arrived was more embarrassing than letting them just run through," he says. "One time, we had a flaming drink explode in a woman's face. To this day, we have never served that preparation again [at the Sardine Factory]."

Balestreri's travails illustrate how important it is for maitres d'hotel to keep their poise amidst chaos--including when staff members make mistakes. "When you're wrong, you're wrong," he says. "Just take care of the customer." In fact, Balestreri's stint as a maitre d' taught him how to turn a bad situation into a customer-service opportunity. For example, when Balestreri learned that a Sardine Factory regular diner was in the hospital, the restaurant sent over the man's favorite dish, "Abalone Soup."

Maitres d'hotel earn their keep by providing outstanding service to all guests--even when that means stepping outside their job descriptions. Andrew Ferlazzo once set up a sound system in a farmhouse next to Prince Michel's vineyard so that a couple could play tango music. "They tangoed all night and they later ended up getting married at our restaurant," he says with great pride.

Tiara not required

America has no royalty, so fine dining in the United States is typically a less-formal affair than in Europe. Even those Americans accustomed to European-style fine dining have joined with a new generation of diners and demanded more informality when dining.

"I think people want to eat world-class food in a little more casual environment," says Ferlazzo. "You can't push people to wear a suit and tie when they visit a restaurant that's an hour or so outside of Washington DC."

The casual trend would seem to spell the end of the maitre d'. Not so, the maitres d' hotel say. They have responded by dressing down, smiling more and generally acting less imperious. "The maitre d' has to be chic and friendly," Balestreri says. "It used to be that guests would arrive in a Rolls Royce. Today, the same person comes in wearing an Armani suit and a turtleneck sweater, driving a Porsche."

This generation of newly wealthy Americans is often the preferred audience for today's maitre d', because "it gives us a much larger audience who is much more appreciative," says De Lucia. "These new wealthy people are so busy that they really appreciate the service." Adds Dmitrov, "For me, the challenge is older clients, because it is not unusual for them to have dined in Paris or Rome and then they come to us [expecting formal service]."

Over time, maitres d'hotel may have changed their clothes and demeanor to appeal to an ever-changing clientele, but what has not changed is the personalized customer service for which the position is known. "I don't think maitres d' will disappear," says Dmitrov. "There's nothing old-fashioned about fine service."

[Back to top](#)

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