



## PERFECT CRAB CAKES AT THE PERFECT PRICE



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### Serving Aces: How Restaurants are Improving Customer Service Standards

These days, stepped-up service is the best way to keep diners coming back for more.

Kelly Smith Killian, Editor-in-Chief -- *Restaurants and Institutions*, 5/1/2009

A recent blog post on *Restaurants & Institutions'* Web site drew quite a few responses when it asked whether a certain restaurant's failure to properly honor a guest's reservation reflected poor service standards or just an off night. Readers chimed in with comments ranging from "Don't be so critical" to "The manager failed [the customer] ... in representing his restaurant." (For more, see "Popular Opinion," on page 76.)

Matters of service and what constitutes good service are subjective to be sure. In the end, though, the customer's perception is what counts. And that's the case now more than ever, with discriminating diners expecting their carefully watched, carefully spent dollars to buy them enjoyable experiences that live up to their standards.

"It's one of the things you see when the economy gets a little tough," says Steve Shlemon, president of Tampa, Fla.-based Carrabba's Italian Grill. "You have to be on your game even better when things are tougher. You can't constantly be dropping your pricing and think that people will [go for it]."

Quality of service needs to be a priority, and successful restaurants are stepping up. Here are some of the ways in which servers and managers are meeting and exceeding customers' expectations to help guarantee a good experience, even when something goes wrong:

#### Know the Menu

Knowledge of the menu dishes, ingredients and preparations—is a key element of good service, particularly in the eyes of older guests and women, according to *R&I's* 2009 New American Diner Study. Some 56% of matures (ages 61 and older) say it's one of the top three components of good service; 48% of women agree.

Many restaurants not only take the time to walk servers through the night's specials, but also they provide extra training on specific menu sections—the wine list or a special cheese service, for example—that can boost check averages.

At Carrabba's, the top-scoring restaurant in overall guest satisfaction in *R&I's* 2008 Consumers' Choice in Chains Study, servers go through the line check with the kitchen staff and taste all the specials every night. "The more knowledge they have of the food and [the more they] can convey that to the customer, the more the customer gets excited," says Shlemon. Servers also need to know and be able to communicate to guests which dishes can be customized easily—another point that may help win over diners.

#### Ask the Right Questions

Participants in *R&I's* New American Diner Study said that someone regularly stopping by to check on them is another indicator of good service. Waitstaff can make that trip to the table count even more by asking the right questions.

"When a server says 'How's everything?' what could that possibly tell you that would be useful?" says Philip Mott, assistant professor at Kendall College's Les Roches School of Hospitality Management and a 30-year industry veteran. Mott recommends that servers ask more specific questions, such as "How is the dish? Is there some feedback I can pass along to the chef?" Such language "tells me somebody [else] is also listening to the feedback from the server," he says.

Asking questions like this may encourage a guest to tell you what they *don't* like about a dish. And that, says Mott, is precisely the point. It goes back to the old philosophy, he says, that it's better to resolve complaints immediately rather than to wait until after the customer has left. "We are realizing complaints are good," says Mott. "It's a big deal now, and it's a fundamental change."

Chad Bertelsman, dining room manager at Spiaggia in Chicago, agrees. "If a guest is in the restaurant and they have a complaint, I can fix it; if they call me the next day, I can't fix their experience," he says. Bertelsman makes sure to touch base with his front-of-house staff members throughout the night to see what sort of guest feedback they're getting, and he shares what he has learned with the other employees if it can help improve service.

#### Point Out Value

Even without offering price-slashing promos, operators can address the concerns of budget-conscious diners and earn customer-service points at the same time by having servers single out value opportunities on the menu. "We have menus and wines that vary greatly in price," says Bertelsman. "One thing you have to make sure you do is get the guest into a comfortable service situation so that when the bill arrives they're not uncomfortable." By spending time talking with guests and understanding the dining experience they seek, servers can make recommendations that fit guests' expectations.

Carrabba's offers value on its wine list by presenting nearly all of its more than three dozen wines at different price points, including by the glass, by the quartino (a small carafe) or by the pitcher. "Value is what everybody's talking about right now," says Shlemon. "So there are a lot of ways [diners] can go about [getting] it."

#### Show a Little Flair

Adding a bit of excitement to service can go a long way toward creating a memorable guest experience—one that will compel diners to return and, better still, tell friends about their visit.

Spiaggia aims always to bring a little something extra to the table while staying true to the restaurant's culture of simple, high-quality food and service. One example of this is a tableside tortellini preparation: A bowl containing the pasta—made with capon, pancetta and mortadella—is brought out; the server pours in a capon broth and then a splash of lambrusco (a wine from the same Emilia-Romagna region that inspired the entrée), which provides a little fizz. "The lambrusco really finishes the dish," says Bertelsman. "Within a couple of seconds, you've really added a very interesting service step."

#### Don't Overwhelm Servers

At Carrabba's and fellow OSI Restaurant Partners concept Outback Steakhouse, servers are never responsible for more than three tables at a time. "That is the most we feel we can have and give the quality of service we expect in a casual chain restaurant," says Shlemon. That ratio allows the servers to engage the customers, sell to them and be hospitable.



Guests at Carrabba's Italian Grill know that any dish can be customized however they like.



The care Spiaggia gives its guests has helped it earn multiple James Beard Nominations for outstanding service.

At Spiaggia, there are always two to six service captains stationed on the floor, watching the tables, anticipating guests' needs without hovering. "It helps guests have full confidence because they see people stationed throughout the room in a way they would [be available to] get them anything they would need," Bertelsman says. **Acknowledge Return Guests**

Reservations systems that store guest information are great tools that help restaurants identify repeat visitors—a core audience for driving sales. Mott says simple conversation can also do the trick. Learn to recognize people. Start a dialogue. When guests do return, greet them at the door and engage them with information learned from their previous visit. When managers and servers stationed on the floor work together, one can inform another about a customer they served on a previous visit.

#### Sweat the Small Stuff

"Posture and composure are just as much a part of the ambience of the room as the marble and fine linens," says Bertelsman. So Spiaggia supplies training on these aspects as well as process and procedure. The restaurant also seeks out workers who exhibit traits more intangible than experience.

"We only hire nice people," says Bertelsman. It sounds simple enough, but it's just as important as training. "You can train someone to do anything except be nice. Everything flows easily from there."

#### Popular Opinion

In April, *R&I* senior editor Allison Perlik **wrote of a recent dining experience** in a post on *rimag.com*'s **Open Kitchen blog**. Though her party of three had a reservation, the restaurant (which had only been open for two weeks) had given their table away to a party that had added two extra guests at the last minute. The manager sat Perlik's group at a two-top and promised to bring over another table when one cleared. It never happened, and the man offered no apology. At the end of the post, Perlik asked, "Do you agree that the restaurant should have done more to make amends?" Here is a sample of the responses:

"When my husband and I opened our restaurant, we gave away so much food and so many desserts while we were working out the kinks and assured people that we would fix anything guests were not happy with, and we have had guests return and let us know how much we have improved and [that] they didn't give up on us."

"... It just takes time. Don't be so critical. Enjoy yourself. It is an experience by humans who are imperfect on their best day. Enjoy what is and not what isn't."

"I would venture to say the same thing could have happened to a restaurant that had been open for years ... these situations arise and that's the beauty of this business—trying to fix them!"

"Remember, first impressions are always first impressions whether in business two weeks or two years. That manager failed you and most likely others that evening in representing his restaurant. Build your business one customer at a time and make every error an opportunity to build customers for life."

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