Valley Vitals

The Wait of the World

Career waiters and waitresses serve up some of the secrets of their success.

America often overlooks its true heroes. While the Washington Mall is crowded with monuments, one noble warrior is not immortalized among its statues. If it were, it would be a figure of a bronzed female, standing five-foot-six in starched dress and apron. Her rock-hard calves are a roadmap of varicose veins. Order pad in hand, a pencil behind her ear, she stands ready for battle. As visitors walk by reverently, a motion sensor activates a hidden speaker that blasts Donna Summer’s 1983 hymn to the working-class female, “She Works Hard for the Money.”

Behold the American waitress.

Career waitresses (and waiters) represent a way of life fading as fast as landline telephones. Possessing a ferocious work ethic, they exude a level of hospitality foreign to slacker youth and a flair for multitasking that exceeds the demands of texting-and-driving. The standards they set in their dining rooms are hard-matched by new arrivals to the field.

Working the front of the house means long hours and unremitting stress. But watch an expert waiter carry a tray of monkey dishes or handle a cranky customer and it’s easy to believe that servers are born, not made. Personality, as well as agility, is crucial. And, as always, a friendly customer is nice, but a generous tip remains the ultimate reward.

Edible Hudson Valley scoured the region for front-of-the-house veterans to learn how they came to this work, why they stay and what we can expect from the next generation of servers.

Most of the “lifers” we met found their way into food service either by chance or by economic necessity. Few expected to stay, but most, like Gustavo Zuluaga, who rose from maintenance man to maître d’ at Crabtree’s Kittle House, are happy they have. “This profession has afforded me the ability to live the American dream,” says Zuluaga, who will celebrate his 30th year on the job at the Chappaqua restaurant next year.

[A point about semantics: While the terms waitress and waiter have fallen to political correctness (“waitron” or “server” being the gender neutral terms of preference) like the now-maligned stewardess, none of the career staffers interviewed balked at old-school terminology.]

Editor’s note: Jay Blotcher waited tables at Orloff’s in Lincoln Center in 1983 for three hours.

By Jay Blotcher □ Photography by Jennifer May
Pereira, 55, entered food service 24 years ago as a cruise ship waiter in his native Portugal. “I realized I could take the long hours and the intense pressure,” he boasts. “A good memory is essential in remembering repeat guests names as well as all of their likes and dislikes.”

Even more important is the skill to be able to multitask while remaining calm and exuding a certain finesse.

“I think some people purposefully try to ‘test’ [the waitstaff] and see what kind of reaction they get,” says Pereira. “I see it as a challenge though and when a difficult person leaves happy I go home even happier.”

And what of the current crop of newcomers? “I find that new waiters lack a certain ‘vision.’ They are not able to take a ‘picture’ of the dining room as one should do many times throughout a night. It is important to prioritize and observe the next step at each and every table.”

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There were no false starts to the food-service career of Mary Beth Mills, 40. At age 13, she lied about her age so she could shuck clams for a restaurant on the New Jersey shore. “I’m one of those freaky kids who actually knew,” she confesses. “I wanted to be in this all of my life.”

“The hardest job is not physicality,” says Mills, “but the ability to multitask, which is hard to teach, if you haven’t excelled at it before, like mothers or teachers.”

She sees today’s kitchen environment as being much more civil than in days past. It’s a change she prefers over conditions in the late ’80s and early ’90s, when she worked at Manhattan’s River Club, Atlantic Grill and Picholine. Back then, chefs, sous-chefs and kitchen help would routinely demonstrate a familiarity toward waitresses now recognized as sexual harassment.

“They were just a step above pirates when they were working,” she recounts. “I hated it at the time but I really learned from it.”

Although she questions the communication skills of younger staff members, whom she has observed greeting diners with an offhanded “how are you guys doing tonight?” Mills feels a more relaxed rapport has improved the business. Back in the boom years of 1980’s New York City, scoring the table at a chic restaurant was a blood sport. The more trendy the joint, the more attitude patrons expected from the waiter. “People really wanted to be treated like dirt back then,” Mills attests.

“I miss some of the old polish, and sometimes I don’t, because there was a degree of pomposness.”

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Decker, 53, just marked her 39th year in food service. She’s waited tables at Mountain Brauhaus since 1982, following stints as a dishwasher and then a waitress at the now-defunct Dubois Fort restaurant in New Paltz. The ninth of 12 children, she had three brothers precede her as employees at the Brauhaus.

Decker notes the importance of energy as well as people skills. “Some girls, they don’t have it,” she says. “They don’t have the stamina. You have to deal with the public, the management and the kitchen. It’s constant.”

Dealing with difficult customers is an acknowledged hazard of the job. Decker prefers to take control, coaxing a smile from even prickly diners. “They enjoy the dinner more, and I enjoy serving them more,” she explains. Sometimes, it’s as simple as putting “the bread and butter on the table and they start eating and they relax and their whole attitude changes.”

Her view of younger counterparts? “If they do something wrong, they don’t like to be corrected. There’s a lot of attitude in the younger generation. Believe me, I have a 17 year old; I know all about attitude.”

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Zuluaga, 52, began working at Crabtree’s in 1980, just out of high school. When not busy with his duties as maintenance man, he bussed tables. The waiters would ask him to help them with tableside cooking and preparation of items such as Caesar salad and steak tartare. He became so good at it that, within 15 months, he began waiting tables on his own.

“The best waiters have personalities that are upbeat and positive,” says Zuluaga. “We can teach all of the technical stuff but we can’t teach you how to be nice and to be a caring person. You either have that or you don’t.”

Even when he’s “in the weeds” (food-service parlance for being behind schedule), Zuluaga enjoys his work. “I love what I do so much that even when I get tired or when the pressure mounts in the heat of the moment, I find myself charged by the energy and excitement.”

Zuluaga notices that today’s customers are far more educated than when he began in the business three decades ago, and it’s changed the role of the waiter: “To be an effective server, you have to educate yourself in order to talk intelligently about food and wine.” But ultimately, according to Zuluaga, the most important goal is to “make people happy so they will come back.”

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