

'She gets too hungry, for dinner at eight...' - How to Elevate the Dining Experience - By J. Ragsdale
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2008-09-30

Just picture this. You are at a music festival, seated, awaiting the top performer. He enters, the lights dim, spots begin to cross the stage, the band strikes up. Soon, you are tapping your feet, perhaps drumming your fingers, beginning to sway, mouthing the words, bopping your head. The song moves into the finale. Crescendo!

You are on your feet, moving with others, arms raised, and face aglow. Multi-colored lights explode, smoke bellows, everyone screams, applauding madly. You are on cloud nine, sated and euphoric - almost better than sex. The performer delivered, and you just had a memorable experience via live theatre.

Why can't we experience this when we pick up our dry cleaning, visit the dentist, check-out at the grocery store or buy shoes, the dreamer asks? We certainly should expect something special every time we dine out, this is live theatre, after all. We have made a choice based upon time, cuisine, price and appetite. We know we should be able to 'have it our way' (sic). But, what often awaits us is less than satisfactory. Perhaps, the entrée reflects what we ordered and is at least tepid. Perhaps, we had the obligatory, 'Hi, guys' and then no attention. Maybe, the ambiance was somewhat comfortable, the A/C adjusted, the lights not severely dimmed, so we could read the menu, and the background music muted rather than blaring.

If we all convened and identified various levels of an Experience, from the poor to the sublime, we would find that we too frequently settle for the mediocre. We all share the blame. If the Consumer expects the very least, the owner/restaurateur only turning the tables and counting the covers, the chef just banging out uninspired food and the server ill prepared, trained and motivated - the product, service and facility will never advance, and the Experience becomes further devalued.

Let's go back to that list of levels, which really does mix service, product and facility, along with our senses, quite nicely. You do need a balance. We know that Paris Hilton will not be our Hostess, that Mick Jagger will not be serenading us, or that Johnny Depp or Ashley Judd will be our server or that Wolfgang Puck is back behind the line. We can fantasize, though!

We diners want to be treated specially, and our expectations are simply not monumental, merely justifiable and reasonable.

It all starts with what the restaurant has told us our experience should be. We read it on-line, or in the newspaper, above and underground. Maybe, we rely on those unreliable reviews of experts and patrons. Our initial look, though, is the first impression, which is lasting, and, for some establishments, approach and entry is worrisome. However, now in the foyer we begin to sample the 'flavors' - how we are greeted, the sounds and smells, the escort to the table and presentation of menus. That is if we do not see daunting, 'Seat yourselves', free-for-all invitation.

More 'flavor' is gathered with the condition of our banquette, table, china, chairs, area around our seating, the walls and the ceilings. We do have time to observe, environmentally, ergonomically and hygienically. We all remember well that pad of butter on the high school cafeteria ceiling. What is more noticeable is a frayed carpet, stained, ripped or littered with debris, perhaps a scuffed, cracked or nicked chair. Don't even go searching for gum (even in the finest of places). The utensils and glasses should be sparkling, the china clean and not chipped and any condiments full and not encrusted with contents.

The real opportunity to make the diner feel special lies with the wait staff, Management and the Culinaricians - the performers. This is where a rapport is established, where any and all opportunity exists to give me attention and respect, where memories are forged and expectations met, and, sometimes, exceeded. This is where the players engage the audience, even seduce them.

A smile and welcome go a mile, knowledge of the menu and recommendations are appreciated, thoughtful, unobtrusive conversation a plus, proper service of the food dishes - presentation and removal - critical, filling our glasses with water, replenishing the butter/rolls, several 'swings through' to ensure that we have everything we need, the Manager or Maitre d' visiting to check on our meals and enjoyment. The roles in the kitchen are just as critical. The meal needs to be prepared to order in a timely fashion with creative presentation. It is the human contact, the interaction, the care and concern for a product well prepared and the intimacy of nourishment.

The proper departure rounds out the Experience. The clearing of the dinner/dessert plates, the check presentation, and the long walk out of the restaurant give all employees the chance to show their appreciation for my business. The keen smiles, the thank you's and please returns should be obligatory.

So, now we have established a plateau of good service. What does it take to move the Experience to the remarkable and memorable? It is in the detail, the response and the unexpected. It could be as simple as holding a door open or assisting someone with their coat. It might be achieving that special order request. It could be spontaneous or even how a critical situation was handled. It is that extra step, the intuitive gesture, a long forgotten courtesy.

Each and every instance is registered with your Guest. A restaurant is not a Broadway Review, but you do have the live stage and capacity to inspire. And, good news travels quickly, particularly the Raves.

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This article comes from Hotel News Resource

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The URL for this story is:

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