



Mine the Gold Hidden in Your Menus

By Phyllis Ann Marshall

Enhance your service with food knowledge. When you create a team of servers with excellent food knowledge and enthusiasm who can sell the menu (and the restaurant), you will enhance the dining experience for your guests.

Here are three ways you can do it!

1. Get Servers into the Kitchen

During the training period schedule educational sessions in each department of the kitchen. Adjust and custom-design this training to your concept. Consistent training procedures for each "new hire" and periodic review processes for all other employees are very important. We recommend a quarterly review with special sessions for all when menu changes occur.

Provide basic training in the quality of ingredients, preparation procedures and on-line cooking techniques to improve the servers' ability to properly describe dishes to guests at the table. Then back this training up with a written manual and a kitchen notebook for an easy refresher.

2. Train Continually

Schedule regular pre-shift meetings for the service staff (servers, hosts, bartenders, busboys) with the chef and key line cooks just prior to opening the dining room. Have the chef provide a tasting and a short cooking demonstration to walk the front of the house staff through "new," "special" or "sell tonight" menu items. Make it fun!

Write out the description of the special dishes on a clipboard or record it on tape for any staff members unable to attend. This helps avoid the questions that can interrupt the concentration of the chef and cooks. Occasionally invite purveyors to educate the staff on fish, wine and other specialty, ethnic or imported items distinctive to your operation. If your restaurant has a food focus, (Mediterranean cuisine) post travel posters in the employee area, provide videos, and so forth to educate your team about the culture(s) as well as the cuisine. Olive Garden, for example, is sending their cooks to a culinary school set up in Italy and Houston's has a training restaurant in the Napa Valley.

3. Taste and Talk

Include tasting sessions and encourage eating/tasting discussions. You can't just lay the food out for a free snack and expect to have knowledgeable servers. Discuss how best to describe the dish, the degree of spiciness, the essence of the flavor, the story behind the dish (or its ingredients) and what appetizer or wine would best balance these distinct tastes. When possible, taste the food and wine together.

Create the sizzle! If it is a new or unusual item, be able to describe how this dish compares to others that are more familiar. Let the chef, the line cooks and the servers decide how best to handle special requests (sauce on the side, health restrictions, substitutions) and how to indicate special requests on the ordering system.

Remember, food quality, innovation, and uniqueness establish the perceived value in the guests' eyes. When that moment of truth arrives and the bill is presented...will guests say, "WOW...way too high!" or, "WOW...what value!"?

Phyllis Ann Marshall, President of FoodPower, Inc. helps restaurants mine the gold hidden in their menus. FoodPower, Inc. is a consulting firm that specializes in restoring restaurant revenues. She can be reached at pamarshall@foodpower.com



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