



## ONCE UPON A TIME... THE ART OF SERVICE OF TOMORROW

BY DENIS COURTIADÉ

"Human beings do not have a natural propensity to be hospitable to others." Hospitality is a moral duty. In their attempts to impose it as a natural human act, various religions have clearly understood this. Back in the time of classical antiquity, the arrival of a guest was considered to be a gift from the gods. Even before asking to know who the unknown guest was, a festive meal had to be offered. Even a beggar invited inside for a meal might be an angel or even a god in disguise.

In ancient Greece and Rome, beyond the immediate enjoyment of fine food, banquets and festive dinners were a form of hospitality around a meal based above all on the conviction that sharing food was the foundation of human relations. As such, it was considered that the host would be amply rewarded for organizing such a banquet by the deep pleasure of intellectual exchange that was never lacking, a notable example being that of Plato's "The Banquet"

This was particularly the case for ancient Romans who were accustomed to saying when they had to dine alone, "I've eaten today, but I haven't really dined." This principle has been repeated throughout history: eating alone is often considered to be a sad affair, whereas meals eaten with others create a sort of artificial "bond of kinship" among the participants, as the sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) pointed out.

Even Charlemagne (circa 748-814) issued a decree ordering his subjects to be hospitable with foreign travelers: "We order that throughout our realm, no one - be they rich or poor - shall refuse hospitality to strangers, that no one should refuse food and shelter or fire and water to pilgrims as they travel across the land [...]"

Unfortunately, by the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, mistrust of foreigners had grown, and traditions of hospitality had become a mythical vestige of times past.

In this context, the activities of the *maitre d'hôtel* in restaurants of tomorrow will not be limited to just feeding and serving people. The challenge for this profession in the future will be to rediscover the values of such an age-old sense of hospitality and to be able to welcome and seat guests as well as, yes, 'feed' such people but in a manner that will provide both gastronomic and intellectual pleasure.



ANTOINE DE BEAUVILLIERS,  
WHO OPENED IN 1782 WHAT  
WAS CONSIDERED TO BE  
THE VERY FIRST FINE DINING  
RESTAURANT IN PARIS, OWED  
HIS REPUTATION NOT ONLY TO  
THE QUALITY OF HIS CUISINE,  
BUT ALSO TO HIS EXCEPTIONAL  
ART OF SERVICE AND SENSE  
OF HOSPITALITY

### The role of the host

As we noted earlier, eating alone can be a sad affair. But when it takes place in a restaurant, the *maître d'*, in his or her capacity as host, can provide the friendly and intellectual presence that the meal might otherwise lack. In this case, the art of service means making sure that this person - whose circumstances have led him or her to be a solitary diner - does not feel alone.

Welcoming diners for a table of one goes beyond just greeting them as it entails giving the person you are hosting a sense of belonging as well as taking responsibility for that individual's feeling of well-being for the duration of the meal, and this constitutes an act of hospitality in the fullest meaning of the term.

The famous story of Vatel, the majordomo responsible for organizing the festivities of a banquet given by the Prince de Condé for Louis XIV, illustrates just how far this sense of hospitality can go. Vatel committed suicide on the spot because he thought the fish ordered for dinner would not arrive on time to be served to the king. It seems evident that what he saw as the most catastrophic consequence of this delay was not culinary in nature; it was how it would disrupt the organization of a banquet that was supposed to demonstrate the prince's goal of perfection in terms of hospitality. In that context, it was tantamount to failure in his role as host to the king...

Antoine de Beauvilliers, who opened in 1782 what was considered to be the very first fine dining restaurant in Paris, owed his reputation not only to the quality of his cuisine, but also to his exceptional art of service and sense of hospitality. This is how the writer and *gastronome* Brillat-Savarin described it:

"Beauvilliers had a prodigious memory and even after a lapse of twenty years could recall a patron who had only eaten at his place once or twice before. He would draw a diner's attention to a dish that would best not be ordered, then to another that should be requested without delay before it was too late and then bring to the table yet another dish that the customer had not even considered ordering. He would bring up a wine from his private cellar to which only he held the key. To top it all, his tone was so



friendly and engaging that all these extra items could mistakenly seem to have been offered to the diner 'on the house' and so free of charge."

We have here an exemplary model that shows how elegant it is to greet individuals in a way to make them feel special, but also how important the art of service is when it comes to providing the necessary conditions to ensure efficient and smooth service throughout the meal.

### The challenge confronting hospitality issues in an era of globalization

We think it is important to recognize that table manners and food service vary from one era to another - going from French-style service (both cart and banquet service) to Russian-style service and English-style service - but also from one place to another. Globalization has led us in our restaurants to be at the crossroads of cultures, and so we are constantly confronted with different habits and customs.

Hospitality is a relationship forged between two people and as such requires mutual understanding and interaction. Therefore, it is not enough just to offer food or wine; you really have to go out of your way to engage with other people. In this context, hospitality today means being constantly open-minded and curious about other cultures and able to understand their everyday applications to table manners and service.

In the modern sense of the term, hospitality should encourage us to engage with others: this means making the effort to adapt to customs or a language that we have not mastered and familiarizing ourselves with social codes that are not our own.

In the service professions, hospitality is an absolute priority. Mastering the skills for welcoming and overseeing the reception of individuals as well as understanding their needs is the secret of this profession.

Indeed, in all its aspects, the quality of the service will depend on the individualization of this service and how it is based on the consideration of the other as deserving of special attention.



IN THE SERVICE  
PROFESSIONS,  
HOSPITALITY IS  
AN ABSOLUTE  
PRIORITY

Few professions are as demanding as ours, and in all likelihood, few provide as much satisfaction. All the qualities and skills needed by the *maître d'* of the 21<sup>st</sup> century - ranging from effectively communicating with others to knowing how to behave in all circumstances, from delighting customers to ensuring the enchantment of our own colleagues - constitute the DNA of our professional identity, one that we must not just cultivate but also pass on.

Because it is focused on others - our guests - in a world dedicated to efficiency and profitability, our profession perpetuates essential human values.

OPPOSITE  
DENIS COURTIADÉ  
AND HIS TEAM,  
PLAZA ATHÉNÉE.

TOP  
DENIS COURTIADÉ  
AND MÉGANE  
PANTANELLA  
TAKING CARE  
OF THE SERVICE.  
© PUDLO





### The art of service as a veritable vocation

France enjoys an incomparable and unassailable reputation when it comes to gastronomy, but this goes beyond the mere content of a culinary dish. It is inextricably linked to a context where nothing is left to chance; this is why welcoming customers to the restaurant is such an important aspect of our profession.

In 2010, the “gastronomic meal of the French” was added to UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This gastronomic meal consists of at least four courses to celebrate the art of eating and drinking well. The order of courses can go from the *apéritif* (drinks before the meal) to the *digestif* (liqueurs or spirits) at the end, containing in between them at least four successive courses, namely a starter as the first course, then a fish and/or meat dish with vegetables as the main course, followed by cheese and dessert. The products must be of high quality, the recipes carefully chosen to match the food with wines that are tasted with specific gestures to enhance the sense of smell and taste, and

all this must be served on a well-decorated and well-set table.

This project to defend and safeguard the gastronomic meal was strongly supported by great French chefs, and it acknowledged the great diversity of French cuisine and its attachment to the arts of the table.

In France, each region has at least one gastronomic specialty, but beyond the culinary aspect, there is the social dimension of gourmet meals that has also received special consideration... It acknowledges the important role of the people who produce food items, and this includes fishermen, farmers, and animal breeders... as well as the people who transform the food such as bakers, cooks, and pastry chefs... not to forget those in charge of the service in restaurants. Also not to be forgotten are the gastronomes who know how to savor food and drink. It is all the combined moments resulting in the gathering together of people for a meal at a table - be it breakfast, lunch, or dinner - and involving a sense of conviviality and shared culinary pleasures that constitute the “gastronomic meal of the French”.

TOP LEFT  
DENIS COURTIADÉ  
SERVING CAVIAR.

TOP RIGHT  
THE BRIOCHE  
MARIE-ANTOINETTE  
CAVIAR BY JEAN-IMBERT  
AU PLAZA ATHÉNÉE.  
@ BOBY

OPPOSITE LEFT  
SETTING IN ACTION.  
@ BOBY

OPPOSITE RIGHT  
THE SEABASS JERUSALEM  
ARTICHOKES BY JEAN  
IMBERT AU PLAZA  
ATHÉNÉE.  
@ BOBY

### The notion of service

The very notion of the art of service is based on the idea of “providing service”, and in our profession, this must be a form of altruism by which we consider others deserving of a certain amount of special attention.

In many English-speaking countries, service is never included in the bill, so waiters are motivated to provide good service because they earn most of their income from any tips left by diners who rarely refrain from doing so, except when the latter wish to manifest their dissatisfaction. In France, our philosophy is different, based as it is on the comprehensive training of each employee and on the transmission of good practices by the management staff. For example, I expect my staff never to accept a tip to reserve a specific table in a restaurant: the tip rewards service and is not a payment for something to be done.

Be that as it may, when it comes to hospitality, it seems to me that all too often the exchanges between restaurant staff and customers remain too formal and full of standard routines that are in fact counterproductive when it comes to providing a warm welcome.



WHEN IT COMES TO HOSPITALITY,  
IT SEEMS TO ME THAT ALL  
TOO OFTEN THE EXCHANGES  
BETWEEN RESTAURANT STAFF  
AND CUSTOMERS REMAIN  
TOO FORMAL AND FULL OF  
STANDARD ROUTINES THAT ARE  
IN FACT COUNTERPRODUCTIVE  
WHEN IT COMES TO PROVIDING  
A WARM WELCOME







### The importance of personalized service

In 21<sup>st</sup> century France, we have to deal with an ever-increasing demand for greater liberty in the composition of meals but also with the influx of a cosmopolitan clientele, and this changes every day the way we welcome our guests. I know that I have to adapt all the time. For example, when I greet an American customer, I know that he or she expects me to have a warmly welcoming, even friendly, manner (while, of course, maintaining a certain linguistic formality), whereas an English customer will often maintain a more distant demeanor at the table and appreciate more a certain formality in the exchanges, especially in gastronomic restaurants. As I like to say, “It is never a question of serving from the right or from the left but only of serving from the appropriate side.”

### PREPARING FOR THE CUSTOMER'S ARRIVAL

Preparing for the arrival of guests means taking into account all the cultural aspects of these people: their country of origin, their customary language of interaction, even their profession. It also means asking them what the purpose of their visit is, explaining that if they tell us, we can give them a more personalized welcome (with a candle or a birthday cake, quicker than usual service, a discreet table or, on the contrary, a table with a view, etc.). As for returning customers, we take into account what we've observed and noted down during their previous visits: in that sense, it's when such a customer has left that everything really begins.

### WELCOMING THE CUSTOMER

When a diner arrives, I give importance to what I call the threshold effect, which involves adapting one's manner of speaking and choosing the most appropriate seating and the most suitable head waiter. In the space of a few minutes, or even a few seconds, it's up to us to observe our guests and take note of both their verbal and non-verbal language, of the look in their eyes and overall attitude, as well as of their clothing style and jewelry, etc. All these elements will tell

TOP  
THE ART OF  
UNVEILING A  
COURSE.  
© BOBY

TOP OPPOSITE  
RESTAURANT  
ENTRANCE.  
© BOBY



ONCE THE ENTIRE  
PROCESS OF WELCOMING  
AND CARING  
FOR OUR CUSTOMERS  
HAS BEEN MASTERED,  
OUR PROFESSION  
BECOMES A VERITABLE  
PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE,  
FOCUSED ON OTHERS

us, for example, whether they should be seated at a “display table” in the center of the restaurant in full view of other diners, or along the side of the room for a degree of privacy.

Whatever the type of restaurant or restaurant-goer, in order to cultivate customer loyalty, a maître d' has to be a physiognomist and capable of observing, analyzing, and then adapting his or her manner so as to welcome diners with sincerity and kindness as guests and not just as customers.

### ATTAINING THE HEIGHTS OF A VOCATION IN SERVICE

Once the entire process of welcoming and caring for our customers has been mastered, our profession becomes a veritable philosophy of life, focused on others, in other words, a vocation. Few professions are as demanding as this one but few bring as much satisfaction. For a maître d, the art of service must be a passion, but even more, as said, a veritable vocation.





### France is one of the world's leading tourist destinations!

Thanks to its diversity, history, and heritage as well as its gastronomy, France is one of the most visited countries in the world and attracted more than 100 million foreign visitors in 2024.

Faced as we are with such a diverse clientele with different cultures and traditions, we have a duty to promote and showcase our French *art de vivre*.

So let's ask ourselves the question: how appropriate, caring, grateful, and personalized are our attitudes, actions, and words... when welcoming foreign guests?

**BOTTOM**  
THE PITHIVIERS  
BY JEAN IMBERT  
AU PLAZA ATHÉNÉE.  
© BOBY

**OPPOSITE**  
DENIS COURTIADÉ  
DURING  
THE SERVICE.



We can no longer provide service to customers from abroad without worrying about their satisfaction and developing in them a sense of customer loyalty. Indeed, we need to be more sensitive to the means we put into play to ensure a greater number of return guests.

In our day-to-day work, in everything we do, we need to be able to adapt while preserving the philosophy of our French-style service.

Restaurant-goers who are on a trip to France should have special value for us, and as such, it's up to us to accompany and guide them. Here are two distinct, contrasting examples:

#### AMERICAN CUSTOMERS

**Timing:** While they have lunch at noon, just as we do in France, Americans prefer to dine relatively early (6 p.m.). **Welcome:** customers from the U.S.A. are very participative. They like to talk in a friendly manner and be on a first-name basis... but be careful, they are still a 'customer' and not a spur-of-the-moment friend! They love to be the focus of your attention, so if you pay close attention to them during the service, they'll reward you for it. **Personalization** by means of a business card is very important and much appreciated. **Table:** American customers are used to air-conditioned venues. Remember to systematically serve a glass of water at the beginning of the meal and offer to serve coffee before dessert. **Meals:** Be careful with the way meats are cooked; be aware that French beef tends to be rather chewy, whereas U.S. beef is known for being very tender... and to compare them would be a mistake! Soft drinks are served with ice cubes. American customers will often choose from the menu just a first and main course or even just a main course, because they may prefer to have a starter and later a dessert at home with friends and family rather than at the restaurant. Always warn American customers if there is a very pronounced taste in the dishes they have chosen (e.g. 'fishy' taste). That little extra touch of attention goes a long way... Be careful, the word *entrée* for Americans is a linguistic "false friend" or false cognate, as it designates for them the main course.

#### CHINESE CUSTOMERS

**Timing:** Chinese customers like to have lunch and dinner early and usually eat quickly. **Welcome:** Some forms of politeness that are customary in France (saying hello, thank you, please) are rarer in Chinese culture. It's never easy to interact while taking their coats or other types of outerwear at the reception desk. **Table:** The place of honor at the table is in the middle position opposite the front door. When it comes to superstition, never seat them at table N°4... but a winning choice would be table N°8! If you offer chopsticks, place them above and parallel to the plate (and certainly not have them sticking up in food as this reminds people of a funeral rite for loved ones). **Meals:** Chinese customers usually don't order *apéritifs* (drinks with hors d'oeuvre) to whet the appetite before the main meal, because this 'ritual' does not exist in their culinary culture. Similarly, the Chinese rarely order desserts and do not drink coffee at the end of the meal.

On the other hand, spirits and French wines are very popular in China. A cup of hot water to aid digestion is frequently requested at the start of the meal. They do not appreciate cold first courses, preferring hot dishes. They will be particularly sensitive to the fact that you keep the glasses full at all times during the meal. They like to toast loudly and then drink 'bottoms up'. Chinese customers tend to drink and eat noisily to show that they are enjoying their meal. Don't be surprised if they leave some food on their plate, as leaving an empty plate would mean that they didn't have enough food, and this would make the host lose face. Chinese customers like to share plates of food and are curious to taste unfamiliar food items such as cheese. Beware, this clientele likes to negotiate when the bill comes to the table! Once again, that little extra touch of attention goes a long way... This is a clientele that appreciates diplomacy more than most do, because, in their view, knowing how to keep one's cool at all times is considered to be a great quality. It's therefore all the more important to be patient!



"A customer is the most important visitor on our premises.  
He is not dependent on us.  
We are dependent on him.  
He is not an interruption of our work.  
He is the purpose of it.  
He is not an outsider to our business.  
He is a part of it.  
We are not doing him a favor by serving him.  
He is doing us a favor by giving us an opportunity to do so."  
Mahatma Gandhi

Whether they are restaurant-goers, diners, consumers, tourists, VIPs, gourmets, aesthetes, children, celebrities, restaurant critics, lovers, young people, entertainers, businessmen and women, politicians, laymen, colleagues, influencers or simply customers, our guests are many and varied, so we must do everything we can to make them feel welcome.

We are like our customers: variable. What must never vary is our openness to others and the constant adaptability we need to be able to show our guests what we are so proud of: our French art of living and entertaining. /