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What happened to the maître d?

BY DAVID HAMMOND October 16, 2012 9:00AM

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Walking into Benoit, a 90-year-old restaurant on Paris' Right Bank, we were greeted by Eric Bonneau.

Throughout dinner I noticed that Bonneau kept attentive eyes on the room, making sure everyone was doing their jobs. If guests even started to do anything, Bonneau took care of it, fast. By the end of dinner, we almost seemed to be friends.

Traditionally, the person who directs all restaurant activity is the maître d' (pronounced "mater dee" here).

The maître d' is the person responsible for direct, continuous interaction with diners. The maître d' greets customers by name, walks them to the table, takes their food and drink preferences, and provides tableside service/entertainment like boning fish or igniting a dish to-be-served flambé. This critical link exists between dining room and kitchen, even trains staff.

With casual dining — and restaurant costs — rising, the maître d' has slowly disappeared, deemed unnecessary by many fine restaurants. "In a restaurant with a small staff, it's everyone's responsibility to learn the names and preferences of regular customers so that they feel comfortable, as if they're at home," says Fehribach of Big Jones.

Though the maître d' may be expendable, some still believe a restaurant needs a master of ceremonies, responsible for everything.

Years ago at Chicago Gourmet, I ran into "Check, Please!" host Alpana Singh. I remember her passionately declaring, "It's time to bring back the maître d'."

At her soon-to-be-opened the Boarding House, Singh will do just that, explaining, "Hospitality has become more important than ever. You can't just serve food, and making that personal connection with them goes a long way toward ensuring their happiness and ultimately their decision to return. It inspires hosts and servers to be the best at their jobs, and he remembers those little details that make customers feel welcome and at home."

How important are such services?

Consider how your enjoyment of a meal is influenced by restaurant staff. Good service can make food taste more delicious; bad service, less so. The maître d' is there to ensure — it seems more likely you'll enjoy what you're eating.

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