That’s Not Quite Amore

Erika Nielsen

Abstract

This paper briefly chronicles my current job as a server at Little Italy. The original purpose of the paper was to inform audiences on restaurant etiquette, but it has transformed into an exercise of self-examination and discovery. I include non-fictional elements, as well as devices such as communication through online social networks and blog sites like Twitter and LiveJournal in an effort to better connect with audiences of all sorts who have worked or dined in a restaurant.
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It is Friday night; a highly anticipated film has been released in the theater complex just up the stairs from where you work; and you can barely squeeze through the doors of the entrance because so many people are crowded in the lobby, waiting to get their names on a list for a table while Dean Martin’s lively voice wafts through the air. You experience feelings of anxiety because you know with this many people waiting, your managers are sure to be high-strung and impatient; your co-workers who are already working have likely been double- or even triple-seated and are under a great deal of pressure; and to top it all off, your section is probably a mess because the server before you was too busy or lazy to clean it.

    Step One: take a deep breath.
    Step Two: put a smile on that face.
    Step Three: repeat step one.

*efereriaka Just walked in the door for work. It’s like a madhouse in here!
5 hours ago via Ubertwitter for Blackberry
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This scenario obviously is not what every single shift at Little Italy, a restaurant chain that boasts American-Italian cuisine, is like. On the contrary, there are often days when the restaurant is practically empty until the six o’clock dinner rush, followed by another lull until closing. However, I have had many experiences such as the “hypothetical” one I have just described, and it’s during times like those that stress levels throughout the entire restaurant are dangerously high. Just as anyone could be expected to become curt in a stressful situation, the employees in the restaurant certainly do tend to get very snappy and short with each other. This ranges from the managers to the front-of-house staff (bartenders, servers, hosts, and bussers) to the back-of-house staff (cooks, dishwashers, prep team, etc.). It essentially turns into a Domino Effect, in which one person’s mood affects another’s and another’s and so forth. At the end of the day, I have to hope that everyone realizes there aren’t any hard feelings and that they shouldn’t necessarily take it personally; but it can certainly be hard to remember that while running around the restaurant looking for essential things like cups, plates or silverware.
A description of the front-of-house staff’s respective duties is provided in the Little Italy training manual, which I cited in a research paper entitled “How Little Italy-Honolulu Can Improve Customer Satisfaction and Build Relationships with Loyal Customers”:

“[. . . ] each type of front-of-house employee contributes to the restaurant’s success:

• The Manager ‘contributes to the success of Little Italy through the direction and control of restaurant operations to ensure a positive Guest experience and company profitability. The Manager’s responsibility is to direct the operation of the restaurant, attain sales and profit objectives, maintain the highest standards of food quality, service, cleanliness, safety and sanitation by direction and supervising supervisors and family members.’

• The Host ‘contributes to the success of Little Italy by controlling the flow of Guests within the restaurant. The Host’s responsibility is to create a positive first and last professional image to our Guests and to support all family members.’

• The Wait Assistant (or Busser) ‘contributes to the success of Little Italy by assisting the Server in attending to the Guest’s needs within the restaurant. The Wait Assistant’s responsibility is to support the Server in servicing the Guest, to run food, and to reset tables in an efficient and timely manner.’

• The Server ‘contributes to the success of Little Italy by serving the Guests within the restaurant. The Server’s responsibility is to serve Guests in a friendly, sincere manner and to do ‘whatever it takes’ to ensure a vital, vibrant, and powerfully flavored Guest dining experience.’

Clearly, each member of the staff is valuable in ensuring that the restaurant runs smoothly. In the same research paper, I offer a quick hypothetical breakdown of this Domino Effect:

“Something we have to realize is that the actions of each front-of-house member will affect the actions of another. For example, if a server is rude to the host, it may result in the server not getting seated. If the server is not seated, his or her sales will be low. At Little Italy, the wait assistants are tipped between two and four percent of the server’s sales for the evening, thus low sales mean a low tip for the busser. A low tip can also result in the busser doing a poor job for that server on the next shift, which
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would likely frustrate the server, who may take his or her frustration out on the guest. This negative cycle can continue for long periods of time, but can easily be solved if team members simply work together.”

This is a classic example of how frustrating the job can get because teamwork is at a low point. One of the most difficult things about working at a high-volume restaurant like this is that the tension gets so high that everyone runs around yelling at each other for, at the core of it, no good reason. It is so incredibly easy to complain about working there, particularly because it has been such a breeding ground for negativity for so long. We have had four general managers and a revolving door of assistant managers come in and out of the restaurant in the past two and a half years I’ve been there. As of right now, there are 30+ staff members, including myself, who have been working at Little Italy longer than 75% of the current management team. There has been little consistency in the way we operate (rules for what to do for closing duties, how to pitch a table, etc. have changed more times than I can count); in fact, an inside joke among workers is that we shouldn’t worry about the implementation of a new rule because it will most likely be forgotten within a week. Needless to say, support has not always been stable, and nobody has really been around long enough to ask what the problems are and figure out how to really fix them. Having managers appear so easily replaceable makes it hard for us, as employees, to voice complaints with confidence that they will be heard.

Who would really care about the fact that a co-worker handed me a drawing of a cartoon pig and said that someone had drawn a picture of me? Who is responsible for the fact that the only tables that get automatic gratuity added to their checks are parties of fifteen or more who have signed a contract? Who will really put his/her foot down when a notorious group of guests returns their food yet again? How many times can a person violate our so-called rules before he/she is warned or fired?

To be fair, things have gotten much better with the arrival of our most recent Paisano (General Manager). I personally believe that most of our GMs/managers must have left because they were at a loss as to how to improve the restaurant, and they were tired of being held responsible for any failures. However, in just a few short months of his being there, our current Paisano has seen to a great deal of improvement,
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and I can honestly say that the management team at the Little Italy is at its best right now. There are many aspects of the restaurant that are still waiting to be look at, but I have already heard ideas from the GM about how he can make it better. Some of the questions we’ve asked are being heard and answered, and it is a relief to hear the problems being acknowledged, at the very least.

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eforeri

Sometimes I wonder why I came back to the food/bev industry.

#poorlifechoices

4 hours ago via Ubertwitter for Blackberry

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One of the difficulties I have come across while writing this paper is how honest I should be. A big question that I’m always asked after a long venting session—and frankly, one that I’ve often asked myself—is, “Why don’t you just quit?” There are moments that I remember that make me want to rant, and I could go on about all the many pet peeves I have for hours. In fact, I sometimes do just that, commiserating with co-workers while having a drink after work. Truth is such an important aspect of this paper so many different ways. I want to be honest with you, the reader; I want to be a reliable source for this particular topic; but I also want to be honest with myself, about myself. I can complain to my heart’s content, but I also have to take a step back and really think about what has made me so upset.

It is difficult to look at such a subjective experience and situation in an objective manner. There are times that I get so overwhelmed at work that I will sit in a bathroom stall and cry; another time, I bruised my finger by slamming my hand against a wall out of frustration. Going behind-the-scenes of a restaurant job is not pretty; it’s not all misery, but it’s certainly not a walk in the park, either.

One of the biggest principles practiced at Little Italy is “over-the-top service and hospitality.” In other words, all employees are expected to be at their best at all times with their guests, a rule commonly found in pretty much every customer service job. If you eat at this restaurant, you can expect to hear a lot of yelling, loud talking, and obnoxious singing. When I was a hostess, I would actually laugh out loud—in a playful manner, of course—at guests asking for a “quiet spot” in the dining room and have to
inform them that to be quite honest, such a thing did not exist on a busy Friday or Saturday evening. I can recall receiving far more complaints at the host stand than I ever have in the dining room itself. Sometimes the time quote given for the wait is exceeded; sometimes we lose a reservation; sometimes the number of people in a party increases, and we have difficulty finding proper accommodation. When people are hungry, I find they tend to forget civility and go straight for the metaphorical jugular. I say this from experience because I am that same type of person who becomes quite grumpy when I haven’t been properly fed. As a server, I find the most complaints root from having to wait longer than is probably typical for entrees to come out because the kitchen gets so busy.

My impressions of people have sometimes been unyieldingly negative, and I can now acknowledge that there is just no way that my thought process did not affect the way I spoke to my guests. I do not believe I have ever been outright rude to people; but I do think some guests have probably found me disingenuous. I have always tried to keep a smile on my face and my voice steady, but I sometimes have a bad habit of wearing my heart on my sleeve. I do not find it at all difficult to imagine that frustration shows on my face while talking to a guest and that can very easily make a person feel alienated or offended. It is unintentional, but that doesn’t matter in the customer service industry. Saying “I didn’t mean to make the customer upset” wouldn’t go over well anywhere.

As terrible as it may sound, many servers tend to have pre-conceptions about the people who sit in their section. “Teenagers? Australians? Elderly people? There goes my tip average!” It becomes an automatic reaction, almost like we have somehow been conditioned to emotionally respond to these stereotypes rooted in restaurant myth.

* eforeriaka Bahaha these guests are hilarious. They’re from Australia and mocking the concept of Outback Steakhouse.

5 hours ago via Ubertwitter for Blackberry

eforerika “What makes Outback Steakhouse Australian?” “Mostly the guy who does the voice-over for the commercials.” #falseadvertising

5 hours ago via Ubertwitter for Blackberry
eforerika Yikes. Nice people, but… $60 tab. $5 tip. “Don’t forget to tip your waitresses.”

#wordstoliveby

4 hours ago via Ubertwitter for Blackberry

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Everyone is different, obviously, and I always give everyone the benefit of the doubt because the reasons for low tipping have a great range. For example, it is not customary in Australia, Canada, the UK, Japan, etc. to tip. I have a few Australian friends, and they are always so baffled by the fact that we tip in the United States at all. Elderly people often seem to be of the persuasion that a decent tip is still only about ten percent. High school and college students have reputations for being “cheap,” and it is the assumption that because they are often barely able to go out for dinner at all, they surely must not be able to tip well. Being a college student myself, I’ve actually been subjected to this very treatment.

I remember one particular instance when I went out for dinner with a roommate, and we quite literally saw our server a total of four times: 1) when she took our orders; 2) when she brought out our drinks about five minutes after the appetizers came out; 3) when she dropped the check and bussed our plates; and 4) when she brought back our credit card slips. When we asked for take-out containers, she took the plates, so we assumed she was boxing the food for us; imagine our shock when she came back empty-handed, having thrown our leftovers away. She didn’t blink an eye, so she either didn’t hear both of us ask, or she was incredibly absent-minded and inept. She wasn’t a rude person, but I have to believe that she was new at this job or had been at the job for far too long because she seemed to be merely going through the motions. I’m not saying that a server has to be a clown or an entertainer, but personality is absolutely necessary when working in the customer service industry.

This was the one and only time I have ever given less than a twenty percent tip while eating out (I often give 25-30% depending on how good the service was). We both left her ten percent, which we still thought was being generous. I bring this up not because I’m trying to compare my serving style to hers; I bring it up because I want to make it clear that I’ve been on the receiving end of poor service, and I understand what it’s like. If the girl had at least been a terribly nice person, she would have gotten 20%
from me. I went out to dinner with a friend recently, and while our server was a bit forgetful (he came back to ask what items needed to be put on my credit card when I had just told him a moment before, even though there were only two, and he gave me the wrong type of dessert, though he replaced it), he was very sweet. To quote my friend, “Being nice more than made up for the mix-ups.” The previous dining experience put me in the position of being reminded that bad service leads to a bad tip, something that doesn’t quite cross one’s mind when actually faced with one’s own bad tip.

My first reaction is usually to wonder what was wrong with the guest because obviously, my service was flawless. Remember when you were younger, and you spent all year (or at least the last few months of it) being “nice” because you wanted that one special thing for Christmas? You wrote a letter to Santa and dropped tons of hints to your parents to ensure that you would get it. Then, you opened your gift on Christmas morning only to find a set of pajamas or a sweater that your parents thought for sure that you would love. You smiled because you didn’t want to hurt their feelings, but for the rest of the day, a part of you was disappointed that you didn’t get what you really wanted. I feel like that’s how it is when I get what I would consider a bad tip: I do my best to make the most of an hour or two shared with guests, but sometimes I end up with a lump of coal. All I can really do is keep smiling and keep trucking on because in the end, it’s not worth it to mope.

Nobody likes to admit that they messed up or perhaps aren’t as excellent as they think they are. I know when I’m off my game; on the other hand, I know when I’ve done my very best; and I know when I’m deserving of a good tip. That may sound rather presumptuous, but at the end of the day, I can always admit to myself when I’ve been excellent or mediocre. I also know because there have been many instances when I’ve received what is called a “verbal tip.” These are the tips that end with the guest saying things like, “Thank you so much, you were amazing!” or “You made our night so wonderful!” but not necessarily with cash in my pocket. Another variation of this is the “written tip,” the same words in the form of a note left on the bill. I am always so flattered when a manager tells me a guest mentioned that I was very kind and attentive; I love getting notes saying that I gave great service; I love that this job can allow me to connect with people, even if we are only together for an hour or so.
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Not too long ago, I would have said that in spite of taking pride in my work, I’d much prefer just getting the money. My tune has changed. Yes, I work to earn money, just like everyone else, but to know that I made someone’s night great is such a lovely feeling. Part of my job description is essentially to make people happy, and it’s fantastic to watch people leave the restaurant with full bellies and huge smiles on their faces.

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http://www.eforerika.livejournal.com/
October 18, 2010

The Power of Positive Thinking

I try not to let it get to me, I really do. Sometimes that’s just the crappy hand I’m dealt. When it comes to serving, it can just come down to the luck of the draw. Some people just tip $5 no matter what the bill is or how good the service was. It’s like in the movie Waiting: sometimes I just want to run after a guest, hand them their bad tip back, and tell them they forget their change.

The thing about it is, I serve to make money. The stakes and the stress are higher because I rely on other people to give me a way to pay my rent. I live paycheck to paycheck, and it can get very frightening sometimes.

I think it’s hard to understand tipping if you haven’t worked as a server before (I mean in the U.S., of course). I get paid $7/hr before taxes as a server, so in the end, it’s more like $4/hr. I just feel like... Okay, what are you coming in for? You’re coming in so you don’t have to cook at home and so you don’t have to clean up the mess afterward. Instead, I get to clean up your mess and refill your drinks and take your dirty plates and napkins and all that jazz for an hour. You know how hard it is to do it at home. So at least give me what I deserve.

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At times, being a server can get discouraging. I’m a college student who pays bills for four credit cards, gas, electricity, food, and rent. I tip out a minimum of four percent of my sales (five percent on weekends), which means if I sold $500, I’d only be walking with about eighty dollars (assuming I got a twenty percent tip on every table). Working in a restaurant is tough, particularly because you never know if the night is
going to be slow or busy. There have been days where I walked out with twenty dollars, only to pocket one hundred and twenty the next night.

If you haven't had the distinct pleasure of ever experiencing life as a server, it is nearly impossible to really grasp what it can be like. We do our best to serve people to the best of our ability and as servers (and as is expected in any other type of job), we are expected to ignore any negative aspects of our day so it doesn't affect our work performance. If you're treated poorly or are neglected by your server, you might assume that they've "had a bad day," but it isn't fair for you to have to even consider it. At Little Italy, things can get hairy pretty quickly, whether it is because the kitchen is running behind on making food, or there are no clean glasses to be found anywhere, or you didn't tip the bussers well they night before, and they aren't at all motivated to clean your tables, etc. This is definitely something that puts us servers in a foul mood, but we do our best not to show it because that isn't fair for the guest. Likewise, if guests have had a fight with their mother/father/brother/sister or significant other, they shouldn't take it out on their server. You wouldn't kick your dog if you had a rough day; the server isn't deserving of abuse either. Nobody wants to be a part of an awkward dinner, after all, especially not when you're out at a fun place like Little Italy.

Another thing that I've found to be an issue has been flirtation. Servers don't have much choice other than to simply go along with unwarranted flirtation for fear that any discouragement will be the cause of a lower tip or possibly even a complaint. I once had a table of two gentlemen in their early forties or so, and they kept saying things like, "If you gave me your number, we could talk more about that." I merely laughed as if it were a joke and moved on, but they proceeded to show me inappropriate pictures they'd taken from their cell phones. It became very uncomfortable, but I felt like I was not in a position to take any action. After all, isn't the customer always right?

* eforerika This has been a rough night. Trying to keep my chin up, though.
  #thinkpositivethoughts
  3 hours ago via Ubertwitter for Blackberry
In the end, it’s important for both the server and the guest to remember to be respectful. This may seem purely like common sense, but unfortunately, sometimes people need to be reminded. I’ve witnessed a few people who seem to forget that they have manners once they walk into a restaurant. I experienced the same type of treatment and behavior when I worked as a salesperson at Borders Books & Music. It’s as if people forget they are talking to another human being, not a mindless drone. I still have feelings and original thoughts, so I will get offended if someone is rude to me. It’s hard to bounce back from being snapped at, no matter what that situation is.

Try thinking about the fact that when guests sit down at a table in a restaurant, they are no longer the ones sweating in the kitchen and preparing their own food. Their server gets their drinks, brings them fresh napkins, re-fills their drinks, brings out their your food, makes sure everything tastes great, re-fills their drinks again, and so forth. Servers are at their beck and call, so it can be incredibly discouraging to ask people how their days had been going and get a response like, “I’ll have water.” The way guests respond to their server will set the tone for the rest of the dinner because we adapt to the way we think our guests want to be served. Like a co-worker of mine told me, “I can read my guest. If I feel like they want me to leave me alone, I will. If they start chatting it up, I’ll do the same.”

*  

eforerika It’s kind of a bummer when people ignore you when you’re trying to talk to them. I’m not exactly a mind reader!

3 hours ago via Ubertwitter for Blackberry

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There have been a couple occasions, as I’ve mentioned, when I’ve had to stop everything and take a break. I’ve stood in the freezer, sat in the bathroom stall, taken a
That’s Not Quite Amore

walk around the building, and done various other things to relieve tension. The stress can be overwhelming, and I’ve never had such strong emotional whiplash at any other job. It’s not just about poor tips or uncomfortable encounters; it can be a build-up of those things in addition to an insufficiently stocked workplace and getting yelled at by frustrated managers and the feeling that there’s just nobody you can talk to who would care about how all these things affect you.

Sometimes when I’m having a hard day before or during work, I like to psych myself up by pretending that I have some sort of outrageous goal to attain by the end of the shift. Instead of a server working for tips, I’m a secret agent on the move to catch a wanted criminal; I’m an actress who will be discovered while waiting tables; I’m a superhero trying to save the world, one refill at a time. It may sound silly, but it helps spice things up a bit. I like to walk around signing Disney songs and showtunes and wait to see how long it takes before everyone else is singing them, too. Little things like that—music, sharing a laugh, pretending to be someone else—make the night easier when the going gets rough.

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eforerika Yay, things are finally starting to look up! 
2 hours ago via Ubertwitter for Blackberry 

eforerika … I spoke too soon. 
2 hours ago via Ubertwitter for Blackberry 

eforerika Just had a cry in the bathroom. Touch up my make-up and back to work I go. 
2 hours ago via Ubertwitter for Blackberry 

eforerika Almost done with work, thank goodness. 
1 hour ago via Ubertwitter for Blackberry 

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Here’s the bottom line: I’m tired; we’re all tired. If people could make money without having to work, jobs obviously wouldn’t be necessary. Unfortunately, that isn’t the case. I ride my bicycle to and from work five days a week, I run around the restaurant trying to make sure my guests are happy, then I come home and clean up around the apartment. All I can really do is hope that I’ll have enough money to make it through the day, week, month, etc.
So it comes back down to the question of “Why don’t you just quit?” I do well enough for myself at my job most of the time, but I’ve realized that there are more positive things about the restaurant that I give it credit for. Servers often joke that if you can keep up with Little Italy, you can keep up anywhere; and there’s also that tiny detail of being fortunate enough to have a job in the first place, particularly during the low economy.

When it comes down to it, I don’t hate my job. No, really, I don’t. In fact, I care a lot about the people I work with and so many of my guests have been so kind and engaging; I’m genuinely grateful for that. However, it is a bizarre fact that people tend to ignore the good and focus on the bad. My two bad tips completely outshine my ten great ones, even if I still make good money at the end of the night. The problem is that bitterness and anger can only consume you if you let it, if you dwell on it, and who’s really interested in feeling unhappy? Every job comes with a set of difficulties; it’s just a matter of being able to accept those as they come rather than being in a constant state of resistance.

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December 5, 2010

**The Power of Positive Thinking**

“A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.” – Winston Churchill

Yes, I went searching for a quote on positive thinking, don’t judge me! I’ve been writing this paper about work for class, and it’s been such an eye-opener for me. When I
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started the class, I did nothing but complain about my job, much like I’ve always complained about it in these entries.

  What’s so good about my job? I get to work with great people, people who know exactly what I’m going through and can truly commiserate with me; people who I call friends and can go out for a drink with after work; people who make me forget all about the fact that I may have had a bad night. I get to meet so many different kinds of folks from all over the world—or all over town, since our primary customer base is from the island. I get the chance to make these people smile and enjoy a relaxing night out, away from the heat of the kitchen, and most of the time, these people are so grateful for that.

What are a few bad tips when you’re looking at the big picture? They mean nothing. The ones I want to remember are the party of women who applauded me when they were finished eating; the family who joked and laughed with me; the kids who so animatedly talked with me about Harry Potter.

  Life is so fleeting; it’s absurd to hold onto the negative like we do. It’s in our natures. But you can change that, I can honestly say that because I’m able to let go of so much more now than ever before. I’ve been picking up shifts left and right lately because I no longer see the restaurant as a breeding ground for punishment, but a place that I should appreciate. There’s no point in being angry about trivial things. I might get frustrated about my financial situation, but I’m not looking for someone to blame anymore. I’ve got to say: it’s been good for the soul.