

# Has Gratuity Culture Reached a Tipping Point?

Paying extra for service has inspired rebellions, swivelling iPads, and irritation from Trotsky. Post-pandemic, the practice has entered a new stage.

By [Zach Helfand](#)



*Do you tip the cashier when all she's done is ring up your salad? Illustration by Christoph Niemann*

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Before screens, tipping, like a marriage proposal, was a private affair. Tips can reveal hidden values or the rumblings of the subconscious. A waitress's breast size, for instance, correlates positively with tip size. "Mad Men"-era husbands tipped more when dining with someone else's wife than with their own. The grief-inflected gratitude of the post-pandemic period introduced new tipping behaviors. Etiquette experts studied the so-called guilt-tip boom. The gratuity, like everything else, has gone contactless—the swivelling of the iPad. In the past three years, according to data from the payroll company Gusto, tips in bakeries and cafés are up forty-one per cent. Apparently, we now tip assistant sports coaches (up three hundred and sixty-

seven per cent) and theatre-box-office staff (up a hundred and sixty-one per cent). Do you tip the cashier when all she's done is ring up your salad? Don't, and you're a cheapskate. Do, and you're a sucker. Where before you scribbled a tip in the candlelit darkness of a restaurant, now you do it in the spotlight glow of the screen. The polite thing to do, standing in line, is to behave as you would at the A.T.M., or the urinal: look away.

Recently, I spoke with Michael Reed, a butcher at Bob's Quality Meats, a shop in Seattle. "It's a field where it's not customary to tip," he told me, on his day off. Reed has worked in what he calls "retail meat" for twenty years. It's more occupation than passion, but he's proud of the personal touches in his butchery. Immigrants describe, and receive, home-country cuts that don't have English names. Reed knows which customers have bad teeth, and he slices their steaks thin. In 2021, Bob's installed a new checkout system: the swivelling tablet. The shop set its own tipping options—from three per cent to ten per cent. "I didn't think it would generate a significant amount," Reed said. "I turned out to be wrong."

There were some complaints. One person ranted on Facebook. But, wordlessly, compromises formed. Graces were extended. Reed would get a buck or two when he deboned a chicken. He wouldn't when he handed over a slab of bacon. The filet-mignon crowd usually chipped in. Some customers couldn't. (Food stamps can't be used for gratuities.) "The tipping system is there to keep the base price affordable for folks like them," Reed said. Over all, a little less than half of his transactions were tipped. The extra money kept him afloat through the inflation years.

Reed's daughter, who is nineteen, was a tipped employee, too. She worked at Starbucks, where, she noticed, her tips were bigger when she wore makeup. One night this summer, her Chevy Cruze got towed at a local ice rink. She and Reed went together to the impound lot: forms, cashier, the tablet. They owed more than nine hundred dollars, including a "convenience fee," the spiritual cousin of the tip. Reed swiped his card. On the screen, additional gratuity options appeared. "A tip?" Reed said. "You must be out of your mind!" The cashier averted her eyes.

The gratuity, classically, functions as a "thank-you," but it can also serve as a "sorry." People most often tip in settings where the workers are less happy

than the customers. The Freudian Ernest Dichter once described the compulsion as “the need to pay, psychologically, for the guilt involved in the unequal relationship.”

Michael Lynn, a marketing professor at Cornell, has studied tips for forty years, beginning when he was a bartender in graduate school. “When you think about it, you go, ‘Why would people give up money they don’t have to?’ ” In restaurants, he has found, the answer has to do with social approval. Lynn almost never tips for takeout or counter service, the domain of the iPads. (“I get pissed,” he said.) To study how the new tip options affected customer behavior, he conducted research with a laundry-service app, which randomly suggested different gratuity amounts. He found that the more the company asked for the more customers paid. Ratings and retention were unaffected. (When the chain Joe’s Crab Shack eliminated tipping, customer satisfaction actually went down.) The dynamic can be compared to masochism.

Tips have long provided a convenient way to foist payment obligations onto others. Kerry Segrave, the author of the comprehensive history “[Tipping](#),” identified the gratuity’s potential origins, in Europe during the late Middle Ages. By the seventeenth century, visitors to aristocratic estates were expected to pay “vails” to the staff. This might have lowered payroll for the estate itself. At least one aristocrat helped himself to some of this new income stream; he threw frequent parties to increase revenues. The system spread. English coffeehouses were said to set out urns inscribed with “To Insure Promptitude.” Customers tossed in coins. Eventually, the inscription was shortened to “*TIP*.” By the end of the nineteenth century, some business owners demanded their employees’ tips. Some cafés charged waiters a fee for the privilege of working there. In France, tips were placed directly into a wooden box called *le tronc*, controlled by the proprietor. French waiters went on strike in 1907, identifying two of the great evils of their profession: *le tronc*, and a ban on mustaches. (“Women are quite determined to starve with their children rather than see the whiskers of their husbands still fall under the razor,” one newspaper reported.) They eventually prevailed on both counts.

American visitors to Europe brought tipping back to the United States. Perhaps no entity did more to spread the practice than the Pullman