

# ***NO*** ***DUMB QUESTIONS***

## **Upgrading Our Successful Menu and Dealing With Dissatisfied Guests**

By Chris Tripoli

**Question:** Our family Italian restaurant has been in business 37 years. We are considering hiring a chef to help us upgrade presentations. We have never had one before and want to be certain we preserve our traditional recipes. Is that possible or do you think we are heading for trouble?

Oh boy. It sounds like you might be walking a tight rope....

Seriously, I think it is possible to get what you are looking for. There are a couple of options I believe you can consider. Option 1 is to look for a chef who is relatively new to the industry. It has been my experience that it is a little easier to direct capable chefs when they are new and eager to make a splash than after they have been established and seem more set in their ways. I believe you will want to create “impact” in presentations, perhaps some seasonal menu specials and add a little creativity to your established entrées without changing your tried-and-true traditional recipes. If this is the case be sure you are quite specific when interviewing potential candidates.

Remember that in this case the words “modify and enhance” are what you are looking to hear and might be seen as a positive sign that you are heading in the right direction. The word “change” is a negative and should raise a red flag. It is not what you want to hear from a chef you are considering. Being in operation for as long as you have means you probably have some

very capable kitchen staff members who have worked there for years.

This creates the need for someone who is compatible with you and your staff. Capability alone isn’t going to be enough for the chef position you are looking for. It might be wise to include your managers, and established line cooks in the selection process. I have seen instances in which established restaurants have provided personality tests to their managers and key staff in order to chart them and use that information when selecting new people to be more certain that they will fit. Success is easier obtained when a team works well together.

Another option to consider is not hiring a chef but instead using a chef consultant or outsourcing this to a culinary team. Upgrading presentations and enhancing a few menu items might not be a full-time job. If you add a person without enough to do to fill their job description, they might not stay busy, and this usually invites trouble. There are some advantages to having a person or group work for a predetermined period of time on a well-defined scope. You might find that you receive more fresh ideas from those who are busy outside your restaurant. I think that reviewing your menu item sales mix, creating a few seasonal specials, and enhancing plate presentations is something you could schedule a couple of times a year. A qualified culinary consultant team might be best for this and will probably cost less than a full-time chef on payroll.

Real-life questions from independent operators like you. When starting or growing a restaurant there are really no dumb questions. If you have a question you'd like addressed in "No Dumb Questions," please contact the author at [alacartect@aol.com](mailto:alacartect@aol.com).

**Question:** Occasionally I have customers who complain about what they have ordered after they have finished most of it. I never know what I should offer. Sometimes I think they are just trying to get something for nothing. Do you have any suggestions?

You could be right. Sometimes a guest might really be trying to get something for free; however, it isn't important that we understand their motive, it is only important that we respond in a way that builds business.

Turning a negative into a positive can be the best form of marketing. For example, let's pretend you are at the expo stand in your kitchen and see a rosemary chicken entrée come out of the oven. You watch as it is placed on a 9-inch oval that has been sitting under heat lamps. You personally tray it and watch as the server takes the tray to Table 42. All of this takes less than a minute. Fast-forward 30 minutes and you stop at the same table to ask how dinner was and suggest desserts. You are staring at the mostly eaten chicken when the guest tells you that her dinner would have been better but the chicken was served cold.

Ouch. You might know that couldn't be the case but if you respond quickly you can use this as an opportunity to create some positive feelings that goes further than just saving this situation.

First, I suggest a big apology, e.g., "I am so sorry, we aren't supposed to serve cold entrées" and take the plate from the table. Second, bring a complimentary dessert and coffee to the table. Third, remove the chicken entrée from the guest check. And for the big finale, present the guest with a gift certificate for a free entrée on her next visit.

I know you might be thinking this is an over-the-top reaction to something that might not have

been wrong in the first place, but I would remind you that in this business, it is far more important to focus on what works, than on what we think is right and wrong. I call this the "buy now-buy later" marketing plan.

From a cost point of view, the actual cost of the chicken dinner that had a menu price of \$14.95 was probably \$5. Add another \$2.50 for the dessert. Let's assume the guest uses the gift certificate on a more expensive entrée when she returns; one that has an actual cost of \$7.50 and we have a total expense of \$15 that should be considered marketing. Hopefully this situation doesn't happen very often, but if it occurred 20 times a month we would have a total cost of \$300 to charge to marketing. That is 20 times that a guest left your restaurant happy and hopefully telling others. And that is 20 occasions when other guests in your dining room saw management attend to a dissatisfied guest, and leaving them with a sense of how important they are to you.

For further convincing, I would ask you to consider the following two questions:

(1) How often does someone come to a restaurant to eat for free by themselves? Hardly ever, so it is fair to assume that when the guest uses the gift certificate they are probably going to bring one or more people with them. The gross profit from the other diners should adequately cover the cost of the free meal.

(2) What advertising or marketing can you do with \$300 a month? Not much, if anything, and certainly nothing that results in this type of bang for the buck. So I suggest that we try not to think of why some guests complain about a meal after they have finished it and try to focus on the fact that the best decisions made in your dining room have nothing to do with right and wrong and *everything to do with what works.*

**RS&G**