

50 Secrets YOUR Waiter WILL Never TELL YOU

BY MICHELLE CROUCH

☾ If you're a vegetarian and you ask if we use vegetable stock, I'm going to say yes, even if we don't. You'll never know the difference. ☽



Why is it that your waiter always shares things you don't want to know (“Hi, my name is Bruce, and I'll be your server tonight”), not the things you need to know (“I'm pushing the mackerel tonight because it's not getting any younger back there”)? What would two dozen servers from across the country tell you if they could get away with it? Well, for starters, when to go out, what not to order, what really happens behind the kitchen's swinging doors, and what they think of you and your tips (19 percent is the national average in major cities, says one survey). Here, from a group that clears a median \$8.01 an hour in wages and tips, a few revelations that aren't on any menu.

What We Lie About

>> We're not allowed to tell our customers we don't like a dish. So if you ask your server how something is and she says, “It's one of our most popular dishes,” chances are she doesn't like it.

Waitress at a well-known pizza chain

>> On Christmas Day, when people ask why I'm there, I might say, “My sister's been in the hospital,” or, “My brother's off to war, so we're celebrating when he gets back.” Then I rake in the tips.

Chris, a New York City waiter and the founder of bitterwaitress.com

>> If you're looking for your waiter and another waiter tells you he's getting something out of the stockroom, you can bet he's out back having a quick smoke.

Charlie Kondak, former waiter at a Denny's in Central Michigan

>> If someone orders a frozen drink that's annoying to make, I'll say, “Oh, we're out. Sorry!” when really I just don't want to make it. But if you order water instead of another drink, suddenly we do have what you originally wanted because I don't want to lose your drink on the bill.

Waitress at a casual Mexican restaurant in Manhattan

What You Don't Want to Know

>> We put sugar in our kids' meals so kids will like them more. Seriously. We even put extra sugar in the dough for the kids' pizzas.

Waitress at a well-known pizza chain

>> At a lot of restaurants, the special is whatever they need to sell before it goes bad. Especially watch out for the soup of the day. If it contains fish

lot of times, servers don't have time to eat. So we all kept a fork in our aprons, and as we cruised through the kitchen, we'd stick our fork in the cobbler and take a bite. We'd use the same fork each time.

Kathy Kniss

>> If you ask me how many calories are in a particular dish, I'm not allowed to tell you even if I know. I'm supposed to say, “All that information is available online.”

Waitress at a well-known pizza chain

I'VE SEEN SOME HORRIBLE THINGS DONE TO PEOPLE'S FOOD: STEAKS DROPPED ON THE FLOOR, BUTTER DIPPED IN THE DISHWATER.

Waiter at a casual restaurant in the Chicago area

or if it's some kind of “gumbo,” it's probably the stuff they're trying to get rid of.

Kathy Kniss, who waited tables for ten years in Los Angeles

>> Now that I've worked in a restaurant, I never ask for lemon in a drink. Everybody touches them. Nobody washes them. We just peel the stickers off, cut them up, and throw them in your iced tea.

Charity Ohlund, Kansas City waitress

>> When I was at one bakery restaurant, they used to make this really yummy peach cobbler in a big tray. A

>> If you make a big fuss about sending your soup back because it's not hot enough, we like to take your spoon and run it under really hot water, so when you put the hot spoon in your mouth, you're going to get the impression—often the very painful impression—that your soup is indeed hot.

Chris

>> I've never seen anybody do anything to your food, but I have seen servers mess with your credit card. If a server doesn't like you, he might try to embarrass you in front of your business associate or date by bringing your credit card back and saying, “Do you

have another card? This one didn't go through."

Charity Ohlund

What You're Really Swallowing

>> Skim milk is almost never skim milk. Very few restaurants outside Starbucks carry whole milk, 2 percent milk, skim milk, and half-and-half; it's just not practical.

Chris

>> In most restaurants, after 8 p.m. or so, all the coffee is decaf because no one wants to clean two different coffee pots. I'll bring out a tray with 12 coffees on it and give some to the customers who ordered regular, others to the ones who ordered decaf. But they're all decaf.

Charity Ohlund

RESTAURANT LINGO

Drive-by Finding an excuse, such as refilling the water glasses or clearing plates, to stop by a particular table. "You've got to do a drive-by on the woman at table 22. She's hot."

Upsell Swaying diners to order more than they normally would or to order a higher-priced item, driving up the bill and hence the tip. Customer: "I'd like a gin and tonic, please." Waiter: "Bombay Sapphire?"

Camper A diner who hangs around too long after he's eaten. Restaurants typically allot about 50 minutes for lunch and up to 90 minutes for dinner, depending on the type of restaurant. You can make up for camping by leaving a bigger tip.

>> If your dessert says "homemade," it probably is. But it might be homemade at a bakery three miles away.

Charity Ohlund

>> I knew one guy—he was a real jerk—he'd go to Costco and buy this gigantic carrot cake for \$10 and tell us to say it's homemade. Then he sold it for \$10 a slice.

Steve Dublanica, veteran New York waiter and author of *Waiter Rant: Thanks for the Tip—Confessions of a Cynical Waiter*

>> Some places buy salad dressings in one-gallon jars, then add a few ingredients, like a blue cheese crumble or fresh herbs, and call it homemade on the menu.

Former waiter *Jake Blanton*, who spent ten years in restaurants in Virginia, North Carolina, and California

What Drives Us Crazy

>> Oh, you needed more water so badly, you had to snap or tap or whistle? I'll be right back ... in ten minutes.

Charity Ohlund

>> We want you to enjoy yourself while you're there eating, but when it's over, you should go. Do you stay in the movie theater after the credits? No.

Waiter at a casual restaurant in the Chicago area

>> The single greatest way to get your waiter to hate you? Ask for hot tea. For some reason, an industry that's managed to streamline everything else hasn't been able to streamline that. You've got to get a pot, boil the water, get the lemons, get the honey,

bring a cup and spoon. It's a lot of work for little reward.

Christopher Fehlinger, maître d' at a popular New York City restaurant

>> My biggest pet peeve? When I walk up to a table of six or seven people and one person decides everyone needs water. I'm making a trip to deliver seven waters, and four or five of them never get touched.

Judi Santana, a server for ten years

What We Want You to Know

>> In many restaurants, the tips are pooled, so if you have a bad experience with the server, you're stiffing the bartender who made your drinks, the water boy who poured your water, sometimes the hostess, the food runners, and maybe the other waiters.

Christopher Fehlinger

>> Even at the best breakfast buffet in the world, 99 times out of 100, the big pan of scrambled eggs is made from a powder.

Jake Blanton

>> Sometimes, if you've been especially nice to me, I'll tell the bartender, "Give me a frozen margarita, and don't put it in." That totally gyps the company, but it helps me because you'll give it back to me in tips, and the management won't know the difference.

Waitress at a casual Mexican restaurant in Manhattan

>> People think that just because your food took a long time, it's the server's fault. Nine times out of ten, it's the

THINK TWICE ABOUT BEING RUDE TO YOUR WAITER

Many CEOs say the way a potential employee treats a waiter offers insight into that person's character and ability to lead, according to an article in *USA Today*. And a 2005 survey of 2,500 members of It's Just Lunch, a dating service for professionals, found that being rude to waiters ranked No. 1 as the worst in dining etiquette, at 52 percent, way ahead of blowing your nose at the table, at 35.

kitchen. Or it's the fact that you ordered a well-done burger. *Judi Santana*

>> When you're with the woman who's not your wife, you're a lot nicer to us, probably because you know that we know it's not your wife.

Caroline Radaj, waitress at a members-only club outside Milwaukee

>> If you're having a disagreement over dinner and all of a sudden other servers come by to refill your water or clear your plates, or you notice a server slowly refilling the salt and pepper shakers at the table next to yours, assume that we're listening.

Charity Ohlund

What Tells Us You're Trouble

>> I get this call all the time: "Is the chef there? This is so-and-so. I'm a good friend of his." If you're his good friend, you'd have his cell. *Chris*

>> The strangest thing I've seen lately? A man with a prosthetic arm asked me to coat check it because the table was a little bit crowded. He just removed his arm and handed it to me: "Can you take this?" *Christopher Fehlinger*

>> We always check the reservation book, scan the names, and hope for someone recognizable. I'm happy if the notes say something like "Previous number of reservations: 92." If they say something like "First-time guest, celebrating Grandma's 80th birthday, need two high chairs, split checks,

but if you requested him, he's going to give you really special service.

JR, waiter at a fine-dining restaurant and author of the blog servernotslave.wordpress.com

>> It's much easier to be recognized as a regular on Mondays, Tuesdays, or Wednesdays. Once you're recognized as a regular, good things start to happen. You'll find your wineglass gets filled without being put on your bill, or the chef might bring you a sample.

Christopher Fehlinger

>> Trust your waitress. Say something like "Hey, it's our first time in. We

IF YOU SAY, "DON'T WORRY—I'M A REALLY GOOD TIPPER," THAT ALWAYS MEANS YOU AREN'T.

Chris

gluten allergy," then I start rummaging through my pockets for a crisp bill for the hostess and I make sure to tell her how much I love her hair fixed like that. *Charity Ohlund*

How to Be a Good Customer

>> Use your waiter's name. When I say, "Hi, my name is JR, and I'll be taking care of you," it's great when you say, "Hi, JR. How are you doing tonight?" Then, the next time you go in, ask for that waiter. He may not remember you,

want you to create an experience for us. Here's our budget." Your server will go crazy for you. *Charity Ohlund*

>> Avoid Mother's Day and Valentine's Day like the black plague. It's crazy busy, so they're not going to be able to pay as much attention to quality. Plus, they bring out a special menu where everything is overpriced.

Steve Dublanica

>> If the restaurant is busy and your child is shy, please order for him. Kids can sit there forever trying to decide,

or they whisper and you can't hear them. Meanwhile, the people at the next table are yelling at you to come over.

Derek Dudley, a waiter at a casual pizza restaurant in Phoenix

What You Need to Know About Tipping

>> The best tipplers tend to be middle-class or people who have worked for everything they have, not the really wealthy or the kid who inherited the trust fund. Which is not to say that we mind if you use coupons. But when you do, tip on the amount the bill would have been without them.

Judi Santana

>> First dates, especially blind Internet dates, are great for tips. You know he'll probably order a bottle of wine and leave a 20 to 25 percent tip because he's showing off.

Jeremy Burton, waiter at a grill in southwest Michigan

>> If you walk out with the slip you wrote the tip on and leave behind the blank one, the server gets nothing. It happens all the time, especially with people who've had a few bottles of wine.

Judi Santana

What Else We'd Like You to Know

>> When you say, "I'll have the pasta Alfredo," it tells me two things: You aren't interested in trying new things, and you don't eat out much. Restaurants put this dish on their menus be-

CHECK, PLEASE

Studies indicate that waiters can boost their tips by:

- lightly touching the customer
- crouching next to the table
- introducing themselves by name
- and—believe it or not—drawing a smiley face on the check

Source: Cornell University tipping expert Michael Lynn

cause it's "safe," it sells, and it's cheap to make. *JR*

>> Don't order fish on Sunday or Monday. The fish deliveries are usually twice a week, so Tuesday through Friday are great days. Or ask the restaurant when they get theirs.

Steve Dublanica

>> At one restaurant where I worked, the salads were made up to three days earlier. They were sitting on a tray with a thousand other salads in the refrigerator. The waiters went back, grabbed a plate and some dressing, and handed it to the customer.

Jake Blanton

>> If you don't like something, don't muddle your way through it like a martyr and then complain afterward. If you don't like it, don't eat it. Send it back and get something else.

Christopher Fehlinger

>> Ask what's in your smoothie. A lot of restaurants use half-and-half. So you think you're ordering a healthy

SUREFIRE STEREOTYPES

In a weekly blog called "In the Weeds" for frothygirlz.com, Kansas City waitress Charity Ohlund describes her favorite customer stereotypes:

> If you are a pack of females, you want separate checks. And I don't mean split evenly by the number of people. I mean split down to the exact number of Diet Cokes with lime each person consumed. And if eight gals order a \$14 appetizer to share, that needs to be split into \$1.75 each. If you are a pack of females over age 55, I'm near tears. You want all of the above, plus you're going to complain about every ... single ... thing.

> If you look like you have an eating disorder, you do. Beautifully skinny model types move their food around the plate for two hours,

or they devour the whole porterhouse and head to the ladies' room immediately.

> If you have a European accent, you are a horrible tipper. Accent = 10 percent. Always.

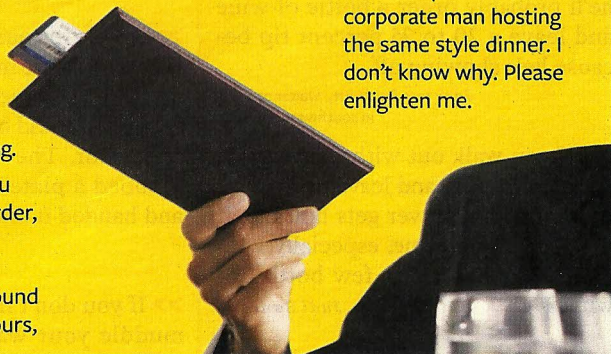
> If you are a young couple out on a date, you are going to pretend to be torn about what to order when you know and I know it's going to be the filet (medium well) and mashed potatoes. Split.

> If you order a Zinfandel and I ask, "Red or

white?" and you look at me with an annoyed face and say, "Pink," I go tell the other servers and we laugh.

> If you have a food allergy, you will talk about it in great detail and then each time I set a new plate in front of you, you will ask me if I remembered your food allergy.

> If you are a woman who has climbed your way into the higher levels of corporate success and you are hosting a business dinner, you will not tip as well as a corporate man hosting the same style dinner. I don't know why. Please enlighten me.



strawberry-banana smoothie, but it's really full of fat.

Waitress at a well-known pizza chain

>> Watch out for what I call the touch-down. That's when the waiter comes around to refill your water and the

pitcher actually touches your glass. If he's touching all the other glasses with the same pitcher, think about all those germs.

Jake Blanton

>> If you're having a problem, speak to the owner if you can. Managers may

have very little power. They're less likely to comp a meal, and most aren't authorized to give away free alcohol. They'll also take it out on the server if you have problems.

Kathy Kniss

>> If you're worried about cleanliness, check out the bathroom. If the bathroom is gross, you can be sure the kitchen is much worse.

Waitress at a well-known pizza chain

>> When I'm hiring, I always look for someone who's spent some time as a waiter. What I learned waiting tables was far more valuable than anything I learned in college as far as how to interact with the human race.

Jim Sheehan, former stockbroker and waiter who now owns a successful IT consulting firm

>> Once on Mother's Day, this older lady came in alone and told me that her kids weren't able to be with her that year, but they had mailed her a gift card. So I told my manager that we had to make this an exceptional experience for her. I told her to come back with a friend some time and use her gift card because tonight, her meal was on us. We comped her dinner, and I sat with her through dessert while she told me about her kids. My coworkers were happy to cover my other tables for 15 minutes. The woman told me she would remember that dinner forever.

Melissa McCracken, longtime waitress in Hawaii



Get 13 more insider secrets from more restaurant workers at readersdigest.com/waiters.

WISH YOU WERE HERE INSTEAD OF ME

Some people just can't relax, even when they're on vacation, as these complaints to travel agents prove.

"No one told us there would be fish in the sea. The children were startled."

"A woman threatened to call the police after claiming that she'd been locked in by staff when, in fact, she had mistaken the Do Not Disturb sign on the back of the door as a warning to remain in the room."

"On my holiday in India, I was disgusted to find that almost every restaurant served curry."

"A hotel guest complained that his soup was too thick and strong. He was inadvertently slurping the gravy at the time."

"My fiancé and I booked a twin-bedded room but were placed in a double-bedded room. We now hold you responsible for the fact that I find myself pregnant."

Thomas Cook Tour Operations and ABTA