

Customers from the Server's Eyes: A Walk-Through Story from the Server's Side of the Table

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December 6, 2017

This essay was originally submitted as an assignment for an Advanced Composition course at East Tennessee State University.

Just to give you, the reader, a heads-up about what this will be: This is a story that will either anger you or enlighten you. What you're about to experience is an inside look into the food business in any of your standard, favorite restaurants. What I am about to grace you with is a server's perspective. I've worked at Cracker Barrel Old Country Store for nearly two years now, and believe me when I say the past two years have been the most eye-opening when it comes to customers' outlooks, attitudes, and treatment of those in food service. To be fair to the reader, I will tell this story as it goes for many servers in various restaurants. Note this exact telling has never happened to me personally, but from the multiple experiences I've had and heard from other servers, this is a combination of traits many people carry with them to the dining table. From the beginning of the guests' dining experience until they leave the tip, I will now take you on a ride through the fun-filled and wondrous profession of a server's life.

Taking a Seat

The moment a customer sits down at a server's table is when service begins. To give you the scenario, let's say a standard family of four sits down: two parents, two kids--a teen and a toddler.

You, as the server, are waiting for the family to sit down, as that is courteous on your part. You wait a minute for them to glance through the menus. Then you go to greet your guests.

Now, many of you know the mantra, “Hi, my name is _____, and I’ll be your server today. How are you guys (or y’all) doing today?” You’re just beginning the introductory line, but before you get to finish the syllables of your name, your customer monotonously says, “Water with lemon.”

You pause and blink back shock and rage. You shake it off and think, “Uh, okay” and get the rest of the drink orders. Once that’s done, you politely say, “Do we need a moment to look through the menu, or--”

But this guy really wants to add insult to injury and interrupts a second time. “We just sat down. We need a minute.”

“Yeah, no problem! Take your time!” you say genially. As soon as you turn your back, your smile drops.

Ordering

Well now you’ve got their drinks--water with lemon, water with no lemon, sweet tea, and a child’s chocolate milk. You’re at the drink station, and you fill those drinks with extra slowness to give the family time to decide on their order. You turn to your fellow server Mike, who’s behind you in the drink line, and tell him all about your asshole table, so he in turn tells you about the asshole table he had earlier. You laugh as you finish up making drinks and head back to the table. Their menus are open still, but they must be ready by this point.

You set the drinks down at each person’s seat and lay the straws in the center of the table. The woman says to you, “Can I have lemon with my water too?”

You didn’t put lemon in her water, because when the man said “with lemon,” you assumed she would request lemon in her drink if she wanted lemon in her drink. Since she didn’t

specify “with lemon,” you gave her a regular iced water. Now that’s one extra thing you have to do. You grit your teeth, nod, and smile.

Then you ask, “Do we think we know what we’d like to eat, or do we still need a few moments?”

The man doesn’t bother to look up as he points at the menu. Finally he says, “Do you have Sunday chicken today?”

You say, “Uh, no sir, it’s Wednesday, so today we have the broccoli cheddar chicken.”

He shakes his head. You see he’s really pissed. He grumbles his order, shuts his menu, and thrusts it in your direction. You take the menus gently from him and look to the woman with the fakest smile. “Why is your husband an asshole?” you think to yourself.

It only gets worse. The woman’s cooing to her 2-year-old and asking what he wants to eat. You internally roll your eyes. The kid’s too young to know what he wants. Just order anything. Finally she orders her meal, but with hesitancy. She can’t seem to decide between three sides of carbs or one carb and two vegetables. You just wait. She goes with all carbs. Then she orders a bowl of mac-and-cheese for her kid. “How healthy,” you think.

Now you turn to the teen, who has been texting away this whole time. You look over at your one other table and realize you’re sat again. You look frantically to the girl who’s still texting.

The mom says, “Sam, put your phone down and tell her what you want to eat.”

“What?” the teen snaps.

“Order,” the dad snaps back.

The teen reopens her menu while hardly restraining her attitude as she tells you her order. Now her meal comes with bread, so you ask the girl, “Would you like biscuits or cornbread?”

She looks at her mom and just shrugs with a roll of her eyes. “I don’t care,” she means to say before returning to her texts. Her mother tells you both is fine.

You gather the rest of the menus and notice the baby is already throwing the pegs from the game onto the floor. Splendid.

Meal Time

Alright, so you’ve rung the first table’s meal in and even gave the woman a bowl of seven lemon slices out of spite. You took the second table’s order, and they were much more pleasant than the family. You appreciate their kindness and openness.

In the meantime, you do some other tasks to fill the time. Maybe you roll your silverware, or maybe you help your fellow servers by running their food trays to their tables. Running someone else’s food is supposed to make the dining experience faster. Personally, you don’t like the idea of doing their job or vice versa, but rules are rules, and teamwork is one of them.

It’s been about seven minutes, and you head back into the kitchen after following another server with their multiple food trays. You go to the grill line to check on your own table’s order. You search for your table’s tray, but it’s not there. You quickly make your way to the dining room and see the food’s already on the table. The man looks pissed. Shit.

You hurry out to your guests to make sure everything was done right. Of course, everything’s wrong. You immediately start explaining the kitchen must have left off a few things, but no need to worry, because you’ll go back and get it right away.

“...and I’ll be right back with those carrots. Anything else?” you ask with a smile.

“My carrots!” the man yells angrily.

“Yes, your carrots! I’ll be right back!”

So you rush back and get everything as quickly as possible. You run back to your table and hand them everything they need. You smile pleasantly and ask how the food's tasting, expecting nods at the least, but the woman turns to you and says, "Can we get some jelly? Grape and strawberry. And blackberry and apple butter." She pauses. "Do you have peach jam?"

"No, ma'am."

"That's okay, the rest is fine."

You just nod. She could've told you her list the first time you asked if they needed anything, but it's fine. You gather everything at her request and return back to the table. You lay down the assorted jellies and apple butter, but before you can step away, the woman says, "Oh, and napkins. Sorry."

You don't bother to hide the aggression in your eyes.

The Check and Tip

After a while, when the family looks nearly finished with their plates, you complete your final act of the service routine. You go to the table one last time and ask if they need to-go boxes. The woman smiles and shakes her head to say she's had enough. You think of all those carbs she had and nod with a short laugh.

You lay down their check, which comes out to be \$38.49. You're thinking percentages, but really you're noting body count. There's 4 people at the table. You figure \$2 per person should equal a good tip; that's \$8 overall, which is about a 20% tip. Pretty good for a family of four, right?

You thank them graciously and bid them good night, but then the man stops you. He lays down the check and points to his empty plate. He says, "You know, my steak was really

overcooked. I said medium well, and it tasted well done. I wasn't going to say anything, but honestly, I'm just disappointed. This isn't what I expect when I come here."

Genuinely, you're shocked. He ate the whole meal without any complaint, but now he's "disappointed." He ate it all. There's nothing you can do now. You know that, and he knows that. You respond as sincerely as you can, "I'm very sorry, sir. Is there anything I can do to make things better?"

"No, it's fine," the man says with a shake of his head. "It's fine."

The woman just stares at him and then looks to you, but you're staring at him with the eyes bugging out in rage. Then he says in finality, "Can I just speak to your manager?"

You blink back rage as you nod and go to find your manager. When you find her, you explain what happened. She asks you, "So he ate the steak?"

"Yeah, all of it."

"We can't do anything then," your manager says. "He should have said something during the meal. What's he want you to do?"

She rolls her eyes and peeks around the corner at the table. "I'll be back."

You wait a couple minutes, and she comes back with the check. "Just take off the meal," she says, shaking her head. She's enraged. "He's a complete dumbass. The guy just wants free food. Take it off."

You take his meal off and go back to the table. He doesn't say a word as he looks over his check again. You thank them again, though this time in a much less enthusiastic way. You head back to the kitchen and wait a minute. When you peek back around the corner, they're gone.

You walk out and see they left a mess. There's biscuit crumbs everywhere under the high chair. The little pegs in the Cracker Barrel peg game are scattered over the table and on the floor. There's trash strewn over the plates, and there's even food laying on the table. You're truly disgusted, but whatever, nothing you can't handle. You bite back a sigh as you begin cleaning the table of the mess they left.

You check around for the tip. Maybe they tipped you something at least. Being stiffed isn't unusual for these cases, but you're hopeful. You're still thinking about that \$8 tip. Then you see green. The tip's folded up in the center of the table. You grab it and unroll it, hoping maybe, just maybe, there's at least \$5.

No. It's \$3. That's all. You've made \$3 in the past 45-minute minutes. You shrug your shoulders and feel defeated. Some would add the \$2.13 hourly wage to their tips, but you don't. That bit goes to Uncle Sam, so you never see it. This \$3 will go to your bills. You know--rent, electricity, water, Internet, and the like. But wait, there's something else on the table. You quickly move aside the used napkins. Oh, 16 cents. Yeah, figures.

Well, now that you've finished your journey as a server, what are your thoughts? How does this scene affect what you know about restaurants and the foodservice industry? Although this telling was a bit over the top compared to many standard tables, this telling is a true compilation of many servers' experiences. Although there have been worse tables, it's the little things that can make or break a server's shift. As servers, we want to please our customers, but it's hard to help when customers make the server's job more difficult than needed. Now that you have a little bit of insight into the world of servers, maybe you'll remember this story when you out to eat.

It's important to be nice to your server. They're working hard to pay their bills just like anyone else. Their service does reflect their tips, but since tips are how servers make their livelihood, it's okay to tip more than you're accustomed to laying down. The main takeaway here is to see servers as people and not as servants. Sometimes it just takes a little experience to fully understand what it's like to live in someone's else no-slip shoes. Besides, my mother always advised never to mistreat those who handle your food. I'd take that advice to heart, friends. I haven't even told you the horror of what some servers will do to an asshole's drink.