

By David Rothschild

In the National Restaurant Association's "Holiday Dining" surveys, birthdays are consistently the No. 1 special occasion people celebrate at restaurants. In 2000, 55 percent of respondents reported they'd eaten at a restaurant on their birthday within the last 12 months. About a third said they'd dined out on their spouse's birthday, and the same number commemorated a child's birthday at a restaurant.

When guests choose to celebrate birthdays, engagements, and anniversaries with family and friends in your restaurant, you should feel honored. They're asking you to be a part of what will become life-long memories — and they'll be positive memories if you handle these special events well. Are you and your staff prepared to accept this responsibility?

First and foremost, your reservationists should be trained to enquire about special occasions. Make this a part of your standard reservations script. If you've been advised in advance that someone will be celebrating an important event, don't blow it! Take a lesson from this mishandled scenario:

While making a reservation, a guest mentions that it's his wife's birthday. He asks if the restaurant typically does anything special. Hopefully, the reservationist knows restaurant policy and can answer, "We'll present a complimentary slice of cake with a candle" (or whatever your restaurant policy is).

That evening, the couple enjoys a nice dinner. When they've finished their main courses, the dessert trolley arrives. The waiter goes through the recitation. The husband urges his wife to choose a dessert. She does. When the cake is served there's no candle and no acknowledgement of the birthday by the staff. To make matters worse, the dessert is included on their check. The husband pays the bill and leaves the restaurant, fuming.

He'd called ahead. He'd been assured that everything would be taken care of. Until that moment, the couple had been having a delightful time. As far as



the husband is concerned, the evening is ruined. More than likely, the husband will call the restaurant the next day to complain, or he'll write a letter to tell management of his disappointment. This scenario is played out time and time again in all sorts of restaurants.

How should this situation have been handled? The reservation sheet should have had a notation about the wife's birthday. The hostess or seater should have mentioned this to a member of the service team. Later on in the evening, the hostess should have followed up with a written card repeating the table number, seat number and special occasion — in this case, the birthday. Will these procedures eliminate all of these screw-ups? Probably not, but it will cut the number and frequency.

Everyone on staff needs to be aware of how special events are to be commemorated. If, during the course of the meal, a member of the service team finds out about a special occasion, he should be empowered to act on this information. Some ways this is often handled:

Basic: Cake slice with candle; staff sings a "happy birthday" ditty.

Better: Individual cake (or maybe an oversized cupcake, which is very trendy); inscribed.

Best: Personalized message on marzipan strip or written in the sauce.

Some restaurants go above and beyond. One has the server write the guest's name on a latex balloon. Another takes a Polaroid picture and places it in a paper frame that's been printed with the restaurant logo. With permission, a second photo can be added to a photo wall in your entryway dedicated to people who have celebrated special events in your restaurant.

I love this last idea and would like to update it a little. The restaurant could invest in an inexpensive digital camera and photo printer. Taking a cue from cruise ships, have the server ask if the celebrant would like his or her picture taken. Present it at the end of the meal. If you really want to go crazy, the image could be printed out on edible paper in the bakeshop and placed atop an individual cake! This technology has become affordable with photo cake printing systems priced below \$500.

I know of restaurants where you can surprise the birthday person or anniversary celebrant with a personalized menu. No choices need to be made; all his/her favorites are there. The restaurant might even offer items that are not on their regular menu.

Basic: Customized, printed menu with favorite items from your regular menu.

Better: Adding a few "chef's specialties" that aren't on the regular menu.

Best: Also have the chef and service team sign a copy of the menu and maybe have the chef stop by the guests' table.

Many restaurants, where allowed, will offer a celebratory cocktail (perhaps a Bellini or a signature sparkling wine aperitif). With dessert, many Italian restaurants will offer a complimentary Sambuca or Amaretto. While tribal casinos often make it a policy not to comp alcoholic beverages, you can still add a festive touch.

Basic: Jazz up the guests' beverages (alcoholic or non-alcoholic) with decorative straws, swizzle sticks or other decorations and garnishes.

Better: Have your bartender create a celebration cocktail and have the server suggest it when he takes the beverage order.

Best: Keep plenty of bubbly (or sparkling cider, if your property doesn't serve alcohol) on ice. Consider investing in a private-label bottling for your restaurant or casino. Treat guests to a glass or bottle, or offer it at a special price.

The way the check is presented says a lot about the restaurant. Do you use a check sleeve? Do you present a mignardise — a little something to "sweeten" the check? Think about making it special for special occasions.

Basic: Wrapped mints or reception sticks.

Better: Chocolate truffles.

Best: Personalized gift-wrapped, iced and inscribed large sugar cookie.

Some other thoughts:

- The guest has commented on how much he liked a particular dish. Print out the recipe on high-quality paper and have the chef sign it.
- Use a Labeloff (labeloff.com) to remove the label from the bottle of wine that the guest has enjoyed and present it to him/her.
- A handwritten card, either before or after the meal, thanking the guest for choosing to spend this special time at your restaurant.
- If your restaurant has live entertainment, perhaps a signed CD of the performer could be included in the dinner package.
- A bound journal could be offered for the guests to share a few lines about their experience.

Be creative when it comes to special celebrations. Empower your staff to add those extra touches that will make the meal memorable. Become known as a restaurant that truly makes special occasions special. You'll not only earn the repeat business of those who've celebrated with you, they'll rave about it to others. **NAC**

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