

THE AGE, Tuesday 27 May 1986 29

# THE AGE

## Epicure

Edited by PETER WEINGER

### WATER

## GENE

WHETHER WANTED IN ESPRIT necessary, was the discovery of a generation who waited during their school holidays on inter-town jobs.

Housewives supplemented the family income and university students supported an expensive education by carrying plates through most of their lives.

Their motives were simple and the gratification immediate; suddenly, that overseas trip was within their grasp, the back room could be built and Johnny could have new trains. Today a growing breed of waiters use that overseas trip to further their waiting career by visiting the food and wine capitals of the world. They take jobs at restaurants where they know the food is good and can hope to learn something. The job doesn't pay as well as their school holidays but the restaurant four times as a customer and had experienced a great interest in gastronomy.

David Durr, the maître d' at Stephanie's, hires a waiter, she says she looks for independence in a candidate's attitude over and above experience. They may not have five star certificates in carrying seven plates, but they get top honours in the art of being perceptive and caring," she says.

"I am very choosy. I have to say we have had no problems with apprentices — hundreds of people apply. We have problems with what we want."

"We have lots and lots of men with very European voices ringing up for jobs, and lots and lots of pretty girls waiting for one day a week. That's not what we want."

David, with no formal training, prefers to create a service atmosphere to approach to waiters.

John Gibson, formerly of Jackson and now at Gowings, says he has been overseas. To him, the trick is good waiting is "understatement" — "to be there without them knowing you're there."

Ralph Kyrle-Powell, at Mietta's, believes too many wine waiters gain their knowledge in the most haphazard way. "Wine service people are often not as well educated as their public. As diverse as their backgrounds are one below these four waiters represent the best in their profession. The only thing they have in common is their devotion to their craft and the fact that they all work for excellent restaurants."

He does not occasionally reflect badly on Melbourne BYOs, but does stress that time and money in their waiting staff. They also have the time to understand a waiter and not come up to scratch.

"Every time we get a good write-up in the paper, and we have had quite a few over the years," says Claude. "We have a lot of people who come here to look for trouble, to try and find faults. From the moment they arrive they start to look for something that is not perfect."

For most waiters, the unwritten rule that the customer is right is not negotiable. It is a maxim that is being constantly abused by diners and questioned by restaurant management. Our four waiters all agreed that the customer was not right all the time, but to varying degrees disagreed on how to handle the situation.

"We must know it's not an issue of right and wrong. It's an issue of how strongly we feel about what we are doing, something and we set him accept that we disagree," says Durr. At Stephanie's, the most common misunderstanding arises over the use of such ingredients as liver and so on in a set price menu of \$52 a head.

"If a customer disagrees violently with Robbie Gibson, then he says he prefers to save his energy for himself and for those who deserve it. It doesn't affect me, it's their loss."

Claude, on the other hand, is firm about what is set on a menu and has no expectations that his patrons will quarrel in asking his multi customers to get their checks back on strict terms. rules apply at Fanny's and question whether a bottle of wine should be returned simply because the diner doesn't like it.

Anticipation and perception may be the avoiding such problems, but Ralph Kyrle-Powell says there is little he can do when a diner says he likes a dry white and really means something much softer.

"At a restaurant like Mietta's, they expect you to be able to anticipate what

To be a waiter these days, you not only have to be able to carry plates, you have to be a sensitive, caring individual who has to combine the skills of a diplomat, a psychiatrist, a nurse and a doctor.

JENI POKI explains.

"You say you've tried surf-and-turf and haven't liked it. You say that's not your thing. That's a very Aussie thing. They like to try things, you see their 'impossible taste', he says.

The greatest amount of friction between waiter and customer seems to arise over attitude. Waiters are either too friendly, too stiff or too servile, while customers are either under-enthusiastic, impatient or simply too, too, too much."

Claude believes the Australian psyche often gets in the way of creating a good waiter.

"I've seen professional Australian waiters — maybe three," he says. "They are not willing to serve. They want to be equal, a mate."

He admits good waiters are hard to find, but believes nationally has little to do with many different opinions of the public you have to be a diplomat, a psychologist, a nurse and a doctor. David's sense of humour is central to his service. He believes that the best person made up of customer management and waiter's attitude. He has been known to change waiters at a table before the waiter has even been known to the customer.

"The biggest thing waiters tend to do in my opinion is impose a style upon people, to be authoritarian."

"The best waiters are not to impose a style, but to allow people to be comfortable. I think we have to get to establish our own standards, we are not in awe of the existing experience in such a way have been and we are not prepared to have someone from Europe speak around telling us to sit up, how to eat and what to do."

WHEN Durr (pronounced Durr) Dara was a little girl growing up in Malaysia, her dad worked as a bar boding.

Today, she waits upon the table of others. She says she created the image of being "a service" long ago, but maintain many Australian waiters will interrupt serving with servility.

"A lot of people feel, when they are waiting, they have to prove to you that they are all right because they feel awkward in being a waiter. It's a job."

With her friend and boss, Stephanie Alexander, she trains her food and waiters in the pleasures and creativity of that job.

The former social worker and jazz percussionist has enjoyed an especially serene relationship with her employer for almost a decade. She lived and worked at the original Stephanie's before it moved to its present location in Hawthorn.

REBECCA GIBSON is used to looking after some pretty tough customers — Sammy Davis Jr, Jerry Calton, the Rolling Stones, Amir Kablanian.

As FZ and team manager for Harry M. Miller during the 1980s, Robbie had to work with the father of the famous — the July Garland tour he describes as particularly horrendous he took up waiting and found he loved it.

He joined Tony Gowings at The Landmark in one day ago, when it was said, he worked for 'Fanny's' father, Dennis, at Jackson's in Perth.

"I went from job to job with the Tourist set," he says. "These were very



Photo: NEALE DUCKWORTH



Photo: SEBASTIAN COSTANTO

LEFT: Robbie Gibson underestimates the secret. ABOVE: Ralph Kyrle-Powell: good waiters should also know their wines. BELOW: Claude Verriere: strict European training.

Photo: JOE SARRIAR

WHENEVER a new hotel or restaurant opens in Melbourne with any pretensions to grandeur, a phone call to Fanny's is not far away.

But Claude Verriere, "the world's best waiter" according to regular patron Phillip Adams, is not far away at any price. "Money isn't everything, far from it," he says in a French accent so thick as a Catalan fog and as fresh as the day he arrived in Australia back in 1952.

"I had wanted money I would have opened my own business a long time ago."

"Still, the offers are made, but it seems that nothing will prevent Claude from celebrating 35 years at Fanny's since February next year. His previous experience for his literacy this is indeed a milestone."

As maître d' and collaborator at Fanny's, Claude is acknowledged as the best in Melbourne by his peers and food writers alike. He represents the European tradition of waiting polite but not

discerning people and I was completely naive about food and wine, but I didn't try to do them. I was very down to earth and honest with them and that's the way I learned."

He took a sabbatical at Dennis Gowings' hotel at Mount Macedon before coming to Gowings in East Melbourne and '88 wasn't bad — and this fellow just came in and said, 'Well, you've got to be a waiter, but in a conventional way. I think I was shocked I didn't say anything at all.'"

Indeed, if the "waiter" in question had bothered to scrutinize his waiter's credentials, he would have discovered a finely tuned, dedicated wine lover's palate behind the fresh-faced young man serving him at Mietta's.

Ralph has been involved in the wine industry for more than 30 years, as a lecturer in imported wines at the Académie Du Vin and for the past five years has been a member of the Victorian Wine Optimism team.

To improve relations between wine drinker and wine waiter, Ralph would like to see more members of the wine industry enter the waiting profession. He suggests that he says can compensate for a lack of interest in wine. He adds that he can name only a handful of Melbourne waiters with a wine knowledge — "none at personal level."

His love of the grape came from his father, who was an early convert to Dan Murphy's Saturday morning wine tastings. Ralph's own conversion followed a short-lived career studying law.

"It was at the Queen's Hill Hotel that he really developed a taste for drinking and serving wine. I learned a lot about wine from sitting late at night, after we had closed the restaurant, with Tony Knox drinking Bordeaux and so forth into the wee small hours."

After working as a wine waiter at Mietta's in the city, Ralph is about to return to the Queen's Hill Hotel to take up a position as assistant manager to Mietta's sister, Patricia.

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Durr: Durr: perceptive and caring.

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