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LIFE & STYLE

Waiting Tables at Top-Tier Restaurants Is New Career Path for Foodies

Head waiters can earn \$80,000 a year, including tips, versus \$45,000 for a line cook working longer hours

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By ALINA DIZIK

Dec. 31, 2013 3:43 p.m. ET

A legion of cooking school grads just want to work in the front of the house, bringing a touch of glamour to waiting tables, Alina Dizik reports. Photo: Brian Harkin for The Wall Street Journal.

It only took eight years and a bachelor's degree, but Leah Beach has finally stopped hearing her least-favorite question: What do you really plan to do for a living?

Ms. Beach is already doing it, as a server at restaurant L20 in Chicago. She meticulously assembles and arranges place settings for the restaurant's 14-course \$210 tasting menu. She learns about foods and dishes like velvet crab, matsutake mushrooms and craquelin bread and curates it all into engaging talking points for each new party of guests. "I'm not just listing off a series of ingredients," says Ms. Beach, 31, who moved to Chicago from Minneapolis in 2011 to pursue her food career. "I'm telling them a bit of a story."

Far from biding time before the next acting audition, many of the newest generation of servers at the nation's top restaurants are waiting tables as a way to hone their chops for a career in restaurant management. They are coming out of top culinary and Ivy League schools, and they consider themselves professionals. To get a foot in the door at legendary establishments, many food-obsessed 20-somethings are busing tables.

High-end restaurants are boosting their service game as prices rise up over \$100 for a fine meal and guests become more demanding. A sharp wait staff establishes trust before the food arrives. Josiah Citrin, chef owner of Melisse, a Santa Monica, Calif., French restaurant that offers a \$125 prix fixe dinner, only wants to hire servers with a professional track record. "When waiting tables, there's no chance to fix the error" Mr. Citrin says. "It's not like in the kitchen."

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Enlarge Image

Andrew Chandler, a server at Eleven Madison Park in New York, precision-irons a tablecloth before dinner service. Brian Harkin for The Wall Street Journal

The kitchen has been the customary entry point for the restaurant industry, with culinary and hospitality grads launching their careers in jobs as prep cooks or line cooks. But recently, ambitious grads are realizing they can earn more money working in the dining room.

Head waiters at top-tier restaurants can earn from \$80,000 to as much as \$150,000 a year including tips, according

to industry executives. In comparison, a line cook might earn as little as \$35,000 to \$45,000 a year while working longer hours. The nation's highest-rated restaurants, including Per Se, Le Bernardin and Eleven Madison Park in New York and Alinea in Chicago, hire as few as 10% of the individuals applying for waitstaff jobs.

At the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., 20% of graduates from two- and four-year programs go into "front of the house" positions in the dining room, which also include maitre d's, bartenders and sommeliers, compared with 5% roughly 15 years ago, says Jennifer Purcell, an associate dean overseeing the hospitality and service curriculum. In the past six years, the Culinary Institute has added customer-focused courses, including one on brewed beverages and one on advanced serving. This year, 350 students completed the course work, she says.



Enlarge Image

Celia Erickson, 24, graduated from Cornell University and studied at the Culinary Institute of America before landing a job as a server at Eleven Madison Park in New York. Brian Harkin for The Wall Street Journal

Customer expectations of servers are high. Waiters are expected to be at ease and in command of a wide range of facts and skills. In a 16-course dinner at Eleven Madison Park, a single plate might have 15 ingredients and five preparations, says co-owner Will Guidara. Menus change seasonally. Servers are expected to have accurate answers to specific questions about food allergens, the type of sea salt in a particular dish or the origin of the duck. Service of one dessert, a seasonal

cheesecake with chocolate, requires the server to perform a card trick.

When they are at the top of their game, servers help create a sense of enthusiasm. "As a guest, the more passion you feel for the people serving you the food, the more delicious the food," Mr. Guidara says.

Details count. For a tasting-menu meal, which can take more than three hours, servers introduce dishes at precisely timed intervals. Before the dinner service, servers polish silverware, light candles, smooth tablecloths, arrange wine glasses and box up after-dinner cookies and other take-home treats.

During development of a new dish or beverage, they may weigh in on the type of knife or wine glass to be used. And they give a final inspection to dishes on their way out of the kitchen. At Eleven Madison, the counter where dishes are passed from kitchen to server is covered in a white tablecloth so the wait staff can see the plate exactly how the guest will see it.

Many of the servers at Eleven Madison are recent grads of the Culinary Institute, Cornell, University of Pennsylvania and Harvard. To attract young talent, Mr. Guidara says, the restaurant cultivates a teaching atmosphere, with events such as a weekly



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Alina Dizik and WSJ's Hank Weisbecker discuss this new trend front of house restaurant staff

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"happy hour" course on cocktails and wine often taught by experienced servers on staff. "It's hard for us to keep our staff from coming in three or four hours early," he adds. "They are not just here for a job; they give themselves fully."

Several servers who have moved from

Eleven Madison Park to more casual restaurants have instituted a similarly professional atmosphere, he adds. A networking group called the Dining Room Collaborative began in New York in 2013 to foster education and a sense of professionalism among wait staff at fine-dining establishments. The idea is to make server "a sexy dining-room job," says Anthony Rudolf, the group's co-founder and former general manager at Per Se, in New York.

Celia Erickson, a 24-year-old server at Eleven Madison, has an undergraduate degree in hospitality from Cornell University and completed a yearlong wine and beverage program at the Culinary Institute of America (where her father is provost). When starting at Eleven Madison Park last summer, she shadowed kitchen staff as part of her training and had an entry-level server role. She says she has gained insight into managing a top restaurant. "My first two months, it was really hard for me. I spent five years in school and now I was waiting tables," she says.

"It's almost better if the guests don't notice you," says Chris Humberson, a 23-year-old graduate of the Culinary Institute and a server at Daniel in New York. Mr. Humberson says while in school he realized he didn't want to be a chef. Few guests in a contemporary French restaurant realize how much training it takes to be a server or even bus tables. "We are definitely viewed as less skilled in the eyes of the [guest]," he says. "And you have to be OK with that."

Write to Alina Dizik at alinadizik@gmail.com

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Ezra Blumenthal

bin-Bernanke/Yellen print money for the Bankers. The Bankers spend it on hookers and waiters. Christian Americans are destined to live hand-to-mouth.

Poor Americans, second class citizens in their own country... working tables for the Bankers, ... who are mostly god's chosen people.

Jan 19, 2014



Jeffrey Tierney

"We are definitely viewed as less skilled in the eyes of the [guest]," he says. "And you have to be OK with that."

How about we all learn form this quote and treat the wait staff as the professionals they are and stop being condescending. I for one value the entire staff equally as they all contribute key parts to the dining experience. Do they need PhDs?. No, but if they want to spend the money and it helps them grow as individuals so much the better. We have a new economy, but that shouldn't matter anyway. Treat everyone who serves you with respect and we'll be a lot better off.

Jan 13, 2014



Andrey Abramov

This is downright ridiculous. I am sure parents are glad to spend all that money on Cornell and Harvard so that their child can wait tables. What's next? A license to wait tables? A degree in table engineering?

Jan 8, 2014



Tom O'Hare

One more time....values and priorities matter. Championing capitalism and freedom does not mean that all profit-oriented achievement is value-free. Get some perspective.

Waiting tables and being knowledgeable about food and wine is OK. Very nice. But, if you think that such skills are comparable in social value to other occupations such as teaching, nursing, social work, auto mechanics, electricians, plumbers, builders, etc....then you are a pathetic bourgeois putz.

I love to cook and eat good food, but if you have conflated a particular approach to cooking or a celebrity chef with good living (a few broiled scallops with a demi-glace and a little artful squiggle of some green thing on top), for \$69 (not counting sides, drinks and tips to your Ph.D. waiter), and you get to croon about "What a genius Pierre is! Oh, se magnifique!...when a trained monkey could have replicated the same, then you are an assss, not a conservative, bright thinker, or useful person in a society worth saving. We need some serious fundamental change in the way we do things to get our country back. Retro-royalty-fantasy-camp will not do it.

There are values to be defined. Strain your brain after your hangover wears off from that overpriced krap wine that your sommelier sold you.

Oh! You missed the cheese course? How could you!

Get a life. Get back to reality.

And, no, you really are not better than anyone.

Jan 8, 2014



Dan Coronado

I waited tables as I went to college. Those were fun years. It was the people that I met that made it worthwhile. The fact that I averaged \$50 an hour was a bonus.

Jan 7, 2014



Mark Cunningham

So the server tells you all about the grapes in the wine, the history of the beef, and the ingredients in the dessert. How do you know they're not making it all up?

I've heard tour guides proclaim some outrageous things as the facts when I know for sure it's all B.S.

Jan 3, 2014



Tom O'Hare

Like Kramer's tour of "Olde New York."

Jan 8, 2014

This author has set his or her comments to private.



Andrew Esposito

It's all about learning a skill, and they are doing so... Good for them. Not sitting around waiting for jobs to come to them.

Jan 2, 2014

This author has set his or her comments to private.



BRIAN KULLMAN

The art and craft of good table service is well established in Europe, where people have careers as waitstaff (which requires foreign language skills as well as food knowledge.) Such jobs in Europe appear to be careers, not stepping-stones.

Don't know if European wait staff go to college to train, however.

Jan 3, 2014



Mary Keenan-Sadlon

As late as the 70s they used to go to special "Hotel" schools. I don't know what they do now.

Jan 12, 2014



GENE EVERETT

If the market demands talented and knowledgeable wait staff at high end restaurants, then they will be paid accordingly.

Jan 2, 2014



Geoffrey Elkind

The sub-plot in the movie "My Dinner with Andre" revolves around the theme of quality table service. Perfect timing and presence without intruding on the dining experience of the guests.

Jan 1, 2014



Tom O'Hare

Perhaps. But it was the most boring and pretentious movie of all time.

As for the rise of "foodie" culture and \$100,000 waiters, I think our views of eating and living well have gone off the rails.

I love to cook and eat good food. But, some of this stuff is just

ridiculous....like the movie.

Jan 4, 2014



Sean DeGabriel

I wonder what they claim for tips at the end of the year.

Jan 1, 2014



Alonzo Quijana

If it's on a credit card, then it gets reported to the IRS.

Jan 2, 2014



SUSAN SAYLES

Was a server - we used to call them waitresses back then - for over a year in my youth. It's vigorous physically, can be highly stressful, but there's also the daily free meal and that roll of bills in your pocket after each and every shift. For this kind of work, you really need to be a people person because people, whether they are diners, other servers, cooks, or managers, are in your face every step of the way.

Nowadays though, especially in trendy Manhattan neighborhoods, restaurants strive to have young, model types serve their food by demanding a photo with a resume. That weeds out a lot of people. Things like this, however, only add to homogenization of the New York experience.

Jan 1, 2014



BRIAN KULLMAN

Just waiting for the DeBlasio to launch an investigation into ethnic, race, and gender discrimination in the chic restaurant business: high-earning waiters from ivy league schools interfacing with patrons; faceless chefs toiling in the kitchen for smaller pay.

Jan 1, 2014



BRYAN ABDELNOOR

Let's see how committed he'll be when his donors get pissed off for ruining their dinner spots.

Jan 1, 2014



Tommy Butler

It's a different world in the political and financial centers of power.

Although the free market should prevail, \$100k wages for waiters is both offensive and proof of a stock market bubble. No one describing meal options is worth that wage.

Jan 1, 2014



Matthew Schulz

Who is it offensive to exactly? So rich people make too much money, but when that money then filters down into good, high paying service jobs its offensive?

Jan 1, 2014



Tommy Butler

Ask yourself: what knowledge, skills, and abilities are necessary to be a waiter? Is the psychological experience so heightened by a waiter with an Ivy-League degree that you would willingly pay several hundred dollars more for such service than for a server without such education?

You cannot convince me that this is desirable or provides anything of value. People possessing no higher educational experience are perfectly capable of providing the same service. One does not need academic achievements to fix or serve food of good quality, or to relate to customers. You're fooling yourself if you think otherwise.

In my mind, this is simply silly nouveau-riche ostentatiousness, and a manifestation of the ridiculous American fascination with academic credentials as proof of mastery of a subject.

P.T. Barnum was right.

Jan 2, 2014



Nels Mattson

The employees are worth exactly as much as employers are willing to pay. THAT is the free market pal.

Jan 2, 2014



Tommy Butler

In a true free market, the exchange results in advantages for both parties. The recent gimmick of Harvard-trained waiters is meaningless and illusory.

Convincing a party to spend exorbitant amounts of money for something of little value is not a productive exchange. It is the philosophy of hustlers and used car salesmen.

I'm sure that somewhere, some one will pay a Billion dollars for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. However, It would reflect badly on the seller's reputation for integrity and providing something of value.

Jan 2, 2014



ESTELLE BRENNAN

It's a training experience. Most of the head waiter types are not college grads, they've worked their way up from dishwashers. The Ivy leaguers and CIAs are learning from the ground up and are not making the big bucks.

Jan 2, 2014



Richard Bue

In response to your comment below...you don't value the commodity being bartered for (high quality, well prepared food served by a charismatic professional in an exclusive atmosphere). Some others certainly do value that thing and pay good money for it. There's nothing being "hustled" here. It's a fair trade of product and service.

Jan 2, 2014



Tommy Butler

Next, some one will try to convince you that you need post-doctoral fellows in Chemical engineering from Cal-Tech to pump gasoline into your Bentley, in order to fully enjoy its performance.

The whole concept of over-qualified personnel is absurd.

Unfortunately, it is increasingly common in this economy, where jobs are scarce.

Jan 3, 2014



Nels Mattson

Tommy, if you feel you can train a waiter to be better and cheaper than these ones, open up a restaurant in New York and prove it.

Jan 3, 2014



Thomas Fannin

this is not new stuff. I can remember going to the Covey, the restaurant at The Quail Lodge in Carmel in 1980. First there were only two seatings, reservations had been made when we booked our room. The waiter knew the the percentage of varietal grapes in the wines served with each course. It was a decadent and marvelous experience. Not one I'd do often, but it was worth it.

Jan 1, 2014



JOHN BATES

We have a socialist, service economy and no longer a vibrant, capitalist manufacturing society. Take a quick trip to Bridgeport or Cleveland and see all of the rusted out factories that have moved to Asia. We need to stop expecting for the young to have expansive opportunities in this country, those are now reserved for the Chinese and other expanding, manufacturing based economies.

Yes, it's absurd for culinary school and Ivy League grads to seek careers as waiters

but it's better than many of the alternatives available to them now in our ever downsizing, service based economy. Get used to it.

Jan 1, 2014



Joanie Krubski

you are so right. .this is a joke

Jan 5, 2014



Sarge Hodges

I don't understand the extremely particular detail with which some people concern themselves over food. Maybe they have a gustatory sense that I and others don't have and can enjoy food in a highly nuanced way. Still, it seems like a waste of resources to put an Ivy League education to this purpose.

Dec 31, 2013



Candace Kalish

The Ivy League waitress described in the article is not going to spend her career as a server. She went to the Cornell Hotel School, and her father is provost of the Culinary Institute of America. It is clear that she is planning to manage a high end restaurant, and she probably hopes to own one or to become an executive in a hotel or restaurant chain. In a few years she will be highly paid. Her situation is analogous to that of the iconic kid in the studio mail room who happens to be the chief's nephew. He's not planning on staying in the mail room.

Dec 31, 2013



Donald A. Crane

AND... one can learn a lot in the mail room....where mail comes from and to whom it is going.... useful knowledge that can be picked-up over a relatively short period of time as one moves along in the employment world. Also gives insight into logistics.

Jan 2, 2014



BRYAN ABDELNOOR

Well if you're looking at it from a cost/benefit standpoint I would have to disagree.

Jan 1, 2014



McFatty Malfatti

They are gluttons. When I was growing up it was considered a sin, now it's celebrated. Times have changed.

Jan 2, 2014

Jan 1, 2014



DAN OAKS

The real joke is on a society who pays wait staff more than the teachers of its children.

Dec 31, 2013



Gary Wraughton

Yes, but I'm thinking you only find those kind of salaries where you find high concentrations of millionaires ... NYC (Wall Street banksters) or Los Angeles (Hollywood actors) or Washington DC (lobbyists buying politicians dinner). Where else are you going to find people with enough surplus cash that they can afford to spend \$1000 for a meal?

Dec 31, 2013



JOHN BATES

This is not true anymore. Teachers in many places make much more than the taxpayers that pay their salaries. It's not the 1970s anymore.

Jan 1, 2014



Matthew Schulz

Well, when you consider that the meal price at Eleven Madison Park is \$225 per person (before cocktails) its not that hard. For perspective, a meal at Applebee's is about \$12.

Making a comparison to school cost, average per student public school cost is ~\$11k per student per year, whereas high end private schools charge upwards of \$40k a year.

Now this isn't an exact comparison but you see where I'm going. There's a ton of people making lousy wages at Applebee's and in public schools. Most people want cheap service that they don't think about. There are a select few who are willing and able to pay several multiples the average cost for food (or education). Those lucky and/or good enough to provide service to high priced clients reap the rewards.

Jan 1, 2014



Laura Rucker

Old story, not true. Teachers do OK-to-darned-good in overall compensation (pay and benefits), especially considering their work year, which in any other field would be considered part-time.

Jan 1, 2014



ESTELLE BRENNAN

NY area public school teachers start at around \$50,000 and peak at around \$180,000. It's only the 1% of waiters who are making the big bucks. Everything is relative.

Jan 2, 2014



Leonard Lovallo

America discovers what France has known for years

Dec 31, 2013



Lee Gaffrey

Yes, and the attitude of the American variety is better.

Dec 31, 2013



Nancy Smith

What's really sad about restaurants in Paris is that many are resorting to reheating entrees bought from commercial enterprises. All due to high labor costs.

<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323398204578488990597549094>

Jan 9, 2014



William Glasheen

I paid my dues as a teenager washing dishes in a Howard Johnsons, and got to know the waitress staff there very well. Most were themselves UVA students. Cute... smart... good at what they did... They got a lot more money than I did, and I never for a moment felt envy. And we *ALL* worked our booties off. Restaurant work is real work. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

These people deserve the salaries they get. I say that today as an engineering PhD. And as a way to stick it to Uncle Sam, I make sure I tip in cash. How I show my appreciation is nobody's business but the two of us. And I won't tell you or anyone else how generous I am. But anyone who has "been there" tends to be a good customer. ;-) Good service goes both ways after all.

Dec 31, 2013



Mark B. Spiegel

>>I paid my dues as a teenager washing dishes in a Howard Johnsons, and got to know the waitress staff there very well.<<

I bet you did! Ah, the fringe benefits of a teenaged job!

Dec 31, 2013



William Glasheen

I plead the fifth.

Jan 1, 2014

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