Two brief months ago, you would not have regarded me as an
authority on setting the table. I may have known that the fork
goes on the left, but I can't swear that I did. Then I enrolled in the
New York Professional Service School, the only exhaustive train-
ing course for waiters, captains, and maître d's in this country.
And now I know the following things, which you probably don't.
I have a diploma to prove it:

- When you order wine and the waiter puts the cork down in
front of you on the table, ignore it—you cannot learn anything by
smelling or squeezing the cork.
- Serve women first, then the elderly, then children, and
finally, if they haven't died of hunger, the men. This applies even
when a woman is the host and would have been served last if she
had been a man.
- When you set a table, the tines of all forks should be level
with each other; spoons and knives should be lined up at the base
of their handles.
- Soup is a beverage and must be both cleared and served from
the right like other beverages, an exception to the serve-from-
the-left-and-clear-from-the-right rule. Speaking of beverages,
coffee and tea cups are placed with their handles at four o'clock.
The wineglass goes above the point of the dinner knife.
- One percent of all Americans are waiters.

Dinner parties are so much more diverting when you are a
man who knows so much more than your hostess about setting
the table. Just the other day in an apartment high above Central
Park, at a Yuletide table gleaming with silver pheasants and can-
died fruits, my hostess's face came alive when I showed her that
the tines of her forks resembled a broken comb. It was fun watch-
ing the other women form a fearsome phalanx around her. You
would be amazed at the number of people who think they can set
the table without attending waiter's school.

The course at the New York Professional Service School ran
for seven weekly three-hour sessions, each one brimming with
information and practical exercises. Some of my twenty-seven
fellow students worked at admirable New York City restaurants—
Metro, the Post House, Manhattan Ocean Club, Sofi, Smith &
Wollensky, Remi—and some were looking for jobs at places like
them. Each week we learned about table and plate service, or
flatware and its uses, or wine and dessert service, from Karen
MacNeil, codirector of the school. Then there was a guest lecture
by somebody in the restaurant business—the owner of Union
Square Cafe or Lavin's, the general manager of the Four Seasons,
or a captain at Aurora. At the end of each lesson we had a wine
tasting and sometimes a sampling of fresh herbs, wild mush-
rooms, or foie gras.

Captains and headwaiters at expensive restaurants in New
York earn seventy-five thousand dollars a year from their share of
the tips, so the curriculum puts at least as much weight on teach-
ing techniques to increase your tips as on the techniques of ser-
tice. The moment I opened the school's brochure, I realized that
I would soon be initiated into the secret stratagems that waiters
use to infuriate us, ruin our dinner, and take us to the cleaners.
These are some of the topics that caught my eye:
- How to Increase Tips through Professional Selling Skills
- Handling Difficult Customers
- Controlling the Customer Instead of the Customer Controlling You
THE MAN WHO ATE EVERYTHING

- How to Increase Tips through Conversation and Selling Skills
- How to Increase Tips through Wine Sales
- Creating the Right Last Impression—Timing and the Check

The guest lecturer at our first lesson was an expert in all these disciplines. He is a captain at the most illustrious restaurant in New York, and one of the most expensive. We will call it La Clique, and we will call him Philippe. He is dark, handsome, charming, and articulate. As soon as Philippe begins to speak, I know that I am in the hands of a master:

"Don’t pour them water, you want to sell them water. If I could sell the bread on the table, I'd sell the bread, but I can’t. Maybe someday."

"I want you to underline this," Philippe continues. "I am against pouring water. Make them ask for water. There is a water glass on the table, and they wait for the water to come. Eventually nothing comes, and they’re getting thirsty. Then five minutes later, you say, ‘Would you like some mineral water?’ It’s a very important sale, especially these days, when people drink fewer martinis and a lot more Evian and Perrier. New York tap water, as far as I’m concerned, is much better than Evian and much less expensive. But do you know how much profit the house does on water? Bottled water is about the price of a cocktail—three dollars and fifty cents for a Perrier. It’s no work, no production at the bar, and the customers can pour it themselves. This is fantastic! This is the way you want it to be."

Philippe’s goals at La Clique are to help his customers spend as much money as possible and make them come back for more.

"I take advantage of my strong French accent," he confides. "If you use the fact that you are very handicapped with the language, they feel they have to give you a break and buy whatever you are selling them. It’s almost a handicap not to have an accent."

Two students volunteer to act as customers, a doctor and his wife from the suburbs. Philippe explains that although he knows their table is ready, and although he would like to turn it over as quickly as possible, he wants them to buy a drink first. So, as they enter the room, he greets them and says, "Why don’t you have a drink at the bar, and we’ll see if your table will be ready in a few minutes." As soon as the bartender pours their drinks—and sometimes before—Philippe fetches the doctor and his wife from the bar, his smile inspired equally by a sense of hospitality and by the knowledge that they have spent ten or twelve dollars before he has shown them to their table.

"This is the big thing," he tells the class. "You want to make money. You’re not here just for the glory. You’re in business. The more you sell, the better it is—for you, for the house, for everybody. I want to shock you about this: don’t forget who goes home at the end of the day. It’s your plate and nobody else’s. Will it be full or not?"

Philippe never lets a customer choose his own table. "They go to my table, the one I give to them. Even if their name is Forbes or Nixon, they go where I put them. But you always make it look like you give them the best. You want to keep them under control, always keep them under control. That’s the main thing. You are playing the game, and they are in the game. You reverse that and you’ll have problems."

Philippe doesn’t waste his charm on regular customers familiar with the menu and habituated to the glamour of dining at La Clique. But of couples like the doctor and his wife, who are honored to be here and look around the room at the billionaires and socialites, he says, "You can do whatever you want with them—they are Play-Doh in your hands."

He never lets the customer read the menu for more than four or five minutes. "I have already made up my mind that the doctor and his wife are going to have something from me today, not just anything from the menu." Be light and evasive, he advises, and then "at the moment they don’t expect, be very precise: I recommend something very strongly today. As a main course you have to try the bouillabaisse." You say it as if there is nothing else on the menu, as though everybody eats the bouillabaisse, as
though it will hurt everybody if they don’t have it. But say it nice.” Then Philippe casually asks the doctor and his wife if they would like some salad, as though it comes free with the meal. “This works many, many times,” he tells us.

When Philippe is taking the order, he stands very close to the table. As Karen MacNeil later explains, “When you want something to happen, the closer you stand to the person, the more power you have.” When Philippe is clearing the dishes, he stands as far back as the length of his arm allows.

He never asks if his customers have any questions. If he is truly in control of the table and appears to be inviting questions, the customers will comply by dreaming some up. “Then you’re stuck at this table and there are seven other tables waiting. I see a lot of waiters do this—it’s absolutely crazy.”

As an exception to his general approach, Philippe never forces food on a customer simply because it is expensive. “I try to sell them mineral water, try to sell them more drinks, more wine, an expensive dessert. I pay a lot of attention to how much a bottle of wine costs. But with food I never go by the price. That is something you have to sacrifice because it’s too obvious. You should sell them food only if you are sure it will please them.”

Many restaurateurs instruct their waiters to bring the wine list to the table with or before the menu; this has been shown to increase wine sales, Karen tells us. But Philippe disagrees: “Ninety-nine percent of the time, people know if they are going to have wine or not. The wine list won’t change their minds. God knows I want to sell them wine. But the wine list is big and scary, and the customer will get confused.”

Philippe is a graceful waiter with impeccable training. This is taken for granted. His movements are balletic and weightless; his manner is airless and nonchalant. He has been drilled in the technical rules of service since his boyhood in France—he insists, for example, on removing the salt and pepper from the table after the main course to set the stage for dessert. But he knows when to vary the rules. Wine should be poured from the right, with the right hand, but Philippe may decide to pour across the table rather than interfere with a conversation. For the same reason he may remove plates from the left. But his arm always stays low to the table so that dirty dishes never pass through the diners’ field of vision. If a customer doesn’t move when he tries to replace flatware or crumb the tablecloth, Philippe never bulldozes him out of the way. “My goal is to make them almost forget that I am here. I don’t want them to move. I want them to keep talking and looking at each other and discussing the business, the love, the weather. You are here to disappear when you do something.”

After the main course, many waiters give up on the table. But not Philippe. “It’s far from being finished,” he says. “Every break is a new beginning. Never treat them like a dead table.” A good waiter can double the bill by selling desserts, coffee, and after-dinner drinks. And even after the doctor and his wife pay the bill, Philippe keeps going. “If they stay fifteen, thirty minutes after they pay, sometimes you can open another check. It happens every day.” They are not a dead table until they climb into a taxi.

When Philippe’s powerful psychological weapons fall into the hands of terrorists, the results can be cataclysmic. A week after Philippe’s talk, I had dinner at the Mansion on Turtle Creek in Dallas. Dean Fearing’s modern American cooking is wonderful, and I was looking forward to that unique Texas style of hospitality—it blends the graciousness of the Deep South with the openness and informality of the West. Instead, the service was one part somebody’s idea of Paris, France, and nine parts Al Capone. The captain bickered with my wife when she ordered an inexpensive pasta for her main course and finally bludgeoned her into submission. Then as the wine was poured I took an elbow to the nose because the waiter was too slothful to shift to my right side or shift the bottle to his left hand. (Never reach across a customer unless you have no choice, and then present the inner crook of your elbow, not the protruding joint.) Late in the meal, when it looked as though the staff had quit en masse and I tried to pour my own wine, the very same sloth galloped in from nowhere and wrenched the bottle from my hand.

The captain’s proudest moment came when the main courses
arrived. Although our wineglasses were still more than half full, he hastily poured what was left of the very expensive bottle of red wine we had ordered at the start of the meal, sloshing some on the tablecloth, turned to me with a perfectly straight face, and asked, “Would you like a bottle of wine with your main course?” The Mansion is apparently one of those restaurants where waiters are rebuked if any glass in the room looks less than half full. If the captain had attended the New York Professional Service School, he would know that you never fill a glass more than half full and never refill it until the customer has only about two sips left. Most people who spend money on wine like to see how it develops in the glass; topping off a glass of champagne guarantees that only the first sip will be cold and fizzy.

I left the standard tip when I paid my check at the Mansion at Turtle Creek, though I can’t remember why. Maybe because the food was so good.

We learned countless plays and gambits at waiter’s school. Customers love to hear the sound of their own names, we were told. Constantly reinforce the positive and distract from anything negative or embarrassing; when the kitchen runs out of a customer’s favorite dish, withhold the bad news until you have some good news to bring. Create an aura of comfort and confidence. People go to restaurants to feed their emotions, not their stomachs. (Some customers want to feel important; others want to be entertained; some want the staff to take a personal interest in them, others want to be left alone. Find out precisely what each customer needs.) The previous semester, several students had tried an experiment. Back in their restaurants, they inserted the words “for you” into every sentence, even when it sounded silly, as in “I’d be happy to get a fresh cup of coffee for you,” or “Is this steak done all right for you?” Their tips increased by 20 percent.

In this country, waiters no longer carve the roast at your table or fillet the fish or sauté your veal over an alcohol flame. They rarely even toss the salad or cut the cake or tart. Waiters nowadays simply sell you food, rearrange the silverware, deliver the food, and open your wine. Service has become an illusion, we learned in waiter’s school, and those who best create that illusion are the most handsomely rewarded.

One day we were all divided into teams, given a cold slice of pizza and a Hostess Twinkie, and asked to come up with an enticing description of each—the way waiters do when they try to sell you the day’s specials. My team did particularly well with the Twinkie: “a golden roll of classic lemon genoise, scooped out and filled with a delicate sweet cream.” The moral, I suppose, is that a good waiter can transform even a Twinkie into something worth tipping for.