

# First impressions

The maitre d' sets the mood and tone of a restaurant, so much so that Wellington's finest will be competing for a new award next month. We asked some of the capital's top front-of-house people about their job.

**A**RRIVE AT a restaurant and it is likely that the first person you meet will be a maitre d'. In those first few minutes, they can make you feel welcome, or put you off the place forever.

Maitre d's will be included in Wellington's new Capital Awards, to honour star employees in our bars, cafes and restaurants, along with the top bar, restaurant and cafe, and best wine list.

A maitre d' should really be the restaurant's personality – someone welcoming and pleasant to deal with, who inspires confidence in guests, says Blair Fryer, owner of Vivo Wine Bar, and the awards co-ordinator.

While many maitre d's are also owner-operators, with a financial stake in making sure that customers have a good time, most staff maitre d's earn about \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year, says Fryer.

"You make more money overseas from this kind of job, especially through tips. The remuneration [here] is not as high as it could be."



## SHADEBODINE MOLETA AMBELI

Shadebodine Moleta knows that confident and relaxed, diners sit at their seats and enjoy their meal. If they are flustered, they lose their cool too, start to get bossy and controlling their meals. Even if a table of 10 turns into a table of 18, he does his best to treat dramas like these with a smile.

Shadebodine remains as calm as possible when he greets diners, and works the tables at his Mediterranean style restaurant, Ambeli. He is both maitre d' and co-owner, with Ambeli combined effort between Shadebodine and his wife, Elisquet Moleta, a manager and waiter, and the co-owner Sam Pope, the cook. He believes he has met everyone in the capital at least once from working 12 years serving people at meals around Wellington, and is probably remembered most for his years at Nikau Cafe in Civic Square.

"The key to a successful maitre d' is to know when to put on a show and when to entertain, and when to leave people alone. We get a lot of engagement and also a lot of makeup dinners, couples have had a fight and come to dinner to sort it out."

"People's body language says a lot. You intuitively know that if a couple are here for a business meal, you'll pop them somewhere and intimate."

### No drama:

Shadebodine Moleta is a keen observer of diners' body language at Ambeli. Photo: ROSS GIBLIN

## RUSTY DONWORTH BOULCOTT STREET BISTRO

Rusty Donworth flicks his trademark ginger mane as he takes an empty plate away from a couple in his restaurant, chatting to them as though they're old friends. They probably are. The maitre d' and co-owner of Boulcott Street Bistro is an institution in the capital, well known as the personality of this long-standing, award-winning restaurant. In his 15 years at the bistro, which is 20 years old this year, he has served hundreds of diners, and many are regulars he has got to know on a first-name basis.

Proving that service is the key to a successful restaurant, Rusty dashes away frequently from the interview to answer the phone, take a dessert order, liaise with a courier and chat to guests.

All the time, he does so with a smile, never getting flustered, and looking as though work is simply great fun.

"A good restaurant is more than just one person," says Rusty, who admits, however, that guests often wonder where he is if he has the night or day off. "The most important thing about this job is being passionate about people. It's called hospitality for a reason – you have to be hospitable to people."

Rusty will typically work a 14-hour day. He has to remember names, and the favourite drinks and meals of regulars, and be a mind reader too, anticipating what guests would like and



**People person:** Rusty Donworth has been the personality of the Boulcott Street Bistro for 15 years. Photo: ROBERT KITCHIN

steering the unsure ones in the right direction. Discretion is important, and he won't name-drop about famous guests, nor will he disclose extramarital affairs.

"Some people start restaurants up thinking that you just stand around and enjoy drinking wine and chatting to your friends all day. It's much more than that." SC

## GUISEPPE MALAPONTI HUMMINGBIRD (RIGHT)

Giuseppe Malaponti reels off the names of celebrities he has rubbed shoulders with as though he was born into the A-list – Princess Diana, Liz Hurley, Al Pacino – all customers of London's Le Caprice, where Giuseppe honed his industry skills.

He also met a few celebrities in his 10 years as maitre d' at Hummingbird, one of the capital's best-known restaurants – *Avatar* director James Cameron, actor Jack Black, Australian singer Jimmy Barnes, Carmen ("the queen of queens") and "nearly every minister of the Crown".

Today, the father of two, who also writes the restaurant's wine list, is hoping visiting Welsh crooner Tom Jones might walk through the door.

Career-wise, the Sicilian-born 47-year-old doesn't know anything but hospitality.

As a student in Italy, he worked part time waiting on weddings, first communions, "big family gatherings", before moving to Britain, where he landed a job as a glassie at Brown's Hotel, London's oldest operating five-star hotel, opened by Lord Byron's one-time valet, James Brown, in 1873.

Fifteen years ago, after falling in love with a Kiwi who was on her OE, Giuseppe arrived in New Zealand. His first maitre d' role here – Hummingbird is just his second – was at the legendary Il Casino, run by another flamboyant



Italian, the late Remiro Bresolin.

"It is interesting," he says. "You are trying to accommodate everybody's needs, welcoming people, allocating tables, liaising with service points."

"Basically, the running of the place stops with you, so it can be quite demanding. You do need a lot of tolerance."

"You know, I have worked with some amazing people. Not one single person, but a lot of people have had a big influence on me. If you work with good people you take on what's good about each of them, and you develop."

A good maitre d', he says, welcomes people into the restaurant as if it's "an extension of your own lounge". JJ

### Celebrity sp:

Giuseppe Malaponti's hospitality in rubbing shoulders with some well-known guests. Photo: ROBERT KITCHIN

## TIMOTHEE LEPOUTRE HIPPOPOTAMUS RESTAURANT, MUSEUM HOTEL

Aged seven, Timothee Lepoutre decided that hospitality was his passion and, because he lived in the north of France, no-one thought to talk him out of it. There, hospitality is a respected profession, not just a fill-in job.

From the age of 14, he studied hospitality in the seaside resort of Le Touquet Paris-Plage. He originally planned to wow diners with culinary masterpieces, but his first work placement, as a waiter in a four-star Loire Valley hotel, changed his mind.

"My passion became about the customer service. I started to think, this is what I want to do."

After five years studying, he moved to Birmingham to improve his English. He fled to London and scored a waiting job at the uber-exclusive, five-star Lanesborough Hotel. After eight months, he was promoted to maitre d'.

It is far more than just a meet-and-greet job. When Timothee started at Hippopotamus in June 2008, after following a Kiwi love to New Zealand, he completely revamped the place: wine list, service, setting, atmosphere, music and staff.

"It was hard work. When I arrived, this restaurant was pretty much empty every night. Now we are full every night. We wanted people to come to this restaurant not just to eat, but to have an experience."

He works 10 to 12-hour days, manages 17 staff across a shift of breakfast, lunch, high tea and dinner, and paces the floor to ensure guests are happy.

Despite great leaps in food appreciation, New Zealanders still don't regard restaurant work as a profession, Timothee says. His team is 80 per cent travellers, and the few Kiwis see it as a fill-in job. "They don't have the passion. Hospitality in France is a real job. It's something in the heart and you live it." NM



**French style:** For Timothee Lepoutre, hospitality is anything but a fill-in job. "It's something in the heart." Photo: ANDREW GORRIE



## TESSA GILLAN LOGAN BROWN

She is one of Wellington's only female maitre d's, works up to 65 hours a week, and has a "huge passion" for her job. Yet for all that, Tessa is still asked when she is going to get a real job. Four years into a stint as front of house at Logan Brown, after several years overseas, working flotilla yachts in Greece and in restaurants in London and Edinburgh, the 29-year-old sounds almost resigned to it.

"People here don't really regard [hospitality] as a career. I was working full time waitressing and doing some maitre d' shifts. I would always be asked what I was going to do afterwards. It's completely different in the UK, where I worked with a lot of older men who had been in the industry for years. They were professionals."

Her main role, she says, is to ensure each of the restaurant's customers are receiving excellent service all the time. Beyond that, however, Tessa is also in charge of an assistant maitre d' and an

assistant manager, and is responsible for the smooth running of the dining room and the kitchen, and – when needs be – maintaining the peace. "I need to make sure the waiters are all capable of providing the service customers expect, that they are not running around pulling their hair out, and I need to support the kitchen team and make sure they are not getting heaps of orders at once, that they know how many people are in the restaurant with menus and are about to order. If there were two of me, it would be great."

Tessa has had her fair share of "difficult" punters. She recalls having to step in to break up an altercation between a bar manager and a customer before it got out of hand.

And her favourite customers? "People who haven't done fine dining before, who are maybe a bit shy. You put them at ease and show them a good time." JJ

Reporting by Nikki Macdonald, Sarah Catherall and Julie Jacobson.