

Restaurant Managers:

A comparison of FOH vs. BOH

Restaurants:

Parcel 104

Birk's Restaurant

Bruce Yodis

January 13, 2010

Introduction to Hospitality

This report is a study of two managers in the restaurant business in Santa Clara, the heart of Silicon Valley, one is front-of-house (FOH) and the other is back-of-house (BOH). The first manager, Brian, is the General Manager at Parcel 104, a fine-dining restaurant in the Marriott hotel in Santa Clara near Great America. Parcel 104 is a restaurant that was a venture by Bradley Ogden and features seasonal farm-fresh American food and is also known for its award winning wine list. The second manager is Maurice, the Executive Chef at Birk's Restaurant, also in Santa Clara, about a block from Parcel 104. Birk's is a high volume restaurant that caters to the business district in Santa Clara and is known for its steaks, chops, and seafood. By studying Brian and Maurice, we are able to see a distinct difference in their focus, but at the same time we will see many similarities.

Let's first take a look at Brian's background and his current duties and how all that fits into his career path. Brian developed his appreciation for food and fine from his parents dining at a very young age. He started out busing tables as a teenager and originally had aspirations of being a chef but that changed after being in the industry and watching them. He came to San Jose for college where he got a degree in Radio and Television. During his school years he worked waiting tables at a café in San Jose. After graduating he abandoned the broadcasting career and took a position as a server at AP Stumps in downtown San Jose. He worked there for a while and moved up to Assistant Manager. From there he moved on to the Village California Bistro and Wine Bar in Santana Row where he served as manager. After working there for a while the executive chef introduced him to Parcel 104 but he decided to stay at the Village Bistro as he didn't feel it was the right time to move. However, about five months ago he decided it was time to move on and he landed the position of General Manager at Parcel 104 despite being quite young for someone in that position.

His current duties include answering and sending emails from the hotel and corporation, which takes quite a bit of his time. He also has to verify that they have the proper wine inventory, that the restaurant is properly staffed each day, and that the supervisors are all doing ok. He is also responsible for meetings with the supervisors and staff each day. He has the responsibility for budgeting which is a team effort with BOH and the hotel management. He is currently planning for 2010 which includes understanding the restaurant's concept and making sure events and holiday plans fit that concept and also fit in with the rest of the hotel theme. His current goals are to become better day-to-day and to make the restaurant a "destination restaurant". This fits into his career goals to manage fine dining restaurants but he also has another career goal to become a Master Sommelier. Working at Parcel 104 gives him a great opportunity due to their extensive wine program. They have a master sommelier on the management team and seven professionally trained sommeliers on staff, all of whom he can learn from.

Maurice developed his passion for food and cooking at a very young age in South America "on the knee of his grandma". At the age of 14 he was walking down an alley

and saw the back door of a fried chicken diner ajar. When he went over and peeked in, he saw the chef in his white chef coat and smelled the wonderful aromas from the food cooking and said to himself, "That's what I want to be, I want to be a chef". With that, and his grandma encouraging him to pursue a culinary career, he went to culinary school and studied Cajun and Caribbean cuisine. After that he came to the US and has worked in restaurants in Chicago, Colorado, and California for the past 28 years. He has worked as line cook, sous-chef, manager, executive chef, and even partner in a restaurant venture for awhile. After having been a manager and even partner, he wasn't afraid to take what looked like steps back and work again as line cook or sous-chef if he thought he could gain good experience. When he came to California he got a job at Black Angus as a line cook but only planned to stay a short time. However, he realized he needed experience in high volume, so he decided to stay and ended up staying there for about 5 years. He left there so that he could get back into fine dining. For the next three years he worked as an executive chef at four different small restaurants, some good and some bad, but all good learning experiences. When he interviewed at Birk's it was not for the Executive Chef position; however, the executive chef had told him he had a 5 year plan and was planning to move on next year. So, even though it wasn't the executive chef position he desired, he accepted the offered position. He worked hard, and after a year when the position became available he was promoted to executive chef and has been there for eight years.

His current duties as executive chef include being responsible for back-of-house labor which includes hiring, firing, communication, training, and mentoring. He is also responsible for budgeting food and BOH labor costs. He is the creative force behind the food program which includes research and development, recipe development, testing and implementing new items or recipes, and food costing. Birk's changes its menu twice a year, a process that takes around six to eight weeks to complete. He is also responsible for marketing through chef appearances, culinary events, and charitable and corporate promotional opportunities. He also has to fill in for FOH management responsibilities at times. All this fits in well with his career goals to own his own place at some point. Since he is able to understand and experience both the back-of-house and the front-of-house operations, he feels that will give him a good start in being able to run his own place..

When it comes to challenges that they are facing today, both Brian and Maurice cited the current economic condition. Brian felt that with this economy you have to focus on how to get business, even though the hotel brings an intrinsic clientele from people staying there. On a day-to-day basis, how do you make money today and then how do you make money tomorrow. What do you change or not change? Maurice cited that the downturn in the economy has really affected the numbers, which challenges him to maintain food and labor costs. Labor costs are especially challenging because you still have to maintain a certain amount of staff no matter how busy it is and you also have the challenge of keeping the staff morale up even though hours and bonuses are being

cut and worse, layoffs are being required. These challenges they both face are in line with their focus of FOH versus BOH. Brian's focus is on bringing in the customers to keep the restaurant making money but also in a way to keep the customers happy and coming back. Maurice's focus is on maintaining the highest quality food even though there are many challenges with food costs and labor morale.

Brian felt that a future difficulty (or challenge) he may face was to answer the question, "How do we keep up with what people are eating?" Which way do we go in keeping with the mission and focus of the restaurant and with the theme of the hotel itself. This is a real possible difficulty because people's tastes are always changing as newer foods and techniques are introduced to them. The challenge for Brian is to make sure that Parcel 104's American-themed menu celebrating seasonal delights and showcasing the finest efforts of local growers, ranches and dairies¹ is not compromised but at the same time, meets the needs and wants of the customer.

Maurice felt there were two difficulties he could face in the future. First, he felt it might be difficult to get qualified staff coming out of the recession. Would the hospitality industry be drained through retraining into other industries? He cited that this occurred in the 1980s when there was drainage due to people moving into the technology industry. His second perceived difficulty was in the status of illegal immigration. He felt that if the government were to pursue its goals in cracking down on immigration that it could also hurt the hospitality industry by creating a shortage of hourly workers as many positions of line cooks and dishwashers are often filled by these people willing to work for the lower wage.

With Maurice's first concern; it is possible that the industry could lose some people to other industries where they could possibly make more money and get more benefits. However, one would think that people would tend to move to where the jobs are. According to the US Department of Labor, the food and beverages industry is expected to continue to grow at a 16% rate through 2014, compared with a 14% growth rate of all industries combined. They also state, however, that careers in the hospitality industry are often stereotyped as low-wage and entry-level with little opportunity for advancement so it makes it difficult to hire career people.² So the real challenge will be to find ways to change this image in order to attract good people, and then learn how to keep them in order to maintain this growth rate.

As for Maurice's second concern, if there was a wider government crackdown on immigration it could initially hurt the restaurants that were hiring illegal immigrants as they hold positions that are often seen as unwanted by Americans. However, some economists believe that these positions could be filled by high school dropouts whose

¹ Parcel 104 website, <http://www.parcel104.com/>

² US Department of Labor, High Growth Industry Profile: Hospitality, May 15' 2009, http://www.doleta.gov/BRG/Indprof/Hospitality_profile.cfm

wages may be suppressed by 3-8% due to competition from immigrants. Illegal immigration has both negative and positive impacts on different parts of the economy. With these advantages and disadvantages, economists believe that when averaged over the whole economy, there is a slight advantage to illegal immigration.³ So, it is hard to estimate the impact to the restaurant industry. Will these positions need to be filled by Americans or legal immigrants demanding higher wages? Could these positions be filled by high school dropouts or would these jobs now be available to high school and college students who could possibly be mentored towards making hospitality a career?

Brian's advice to students in the hospitality industry looking to pursue a career in restaurants was really focused on other people. He advised to always remember that hospitality is about people. Remember who you are and what excites you, and hopefully that is people and a desire to see them happy. This refers not only to your guests but also the people who work for you. You need to make sure your employees are happy with their job, and treat them just as well as you would a guest to the restaurant. This is really good advice as the number one most important asset of a restaurant is people, the people that are your guests as well as the people who work in the restaurant. If the employees are happy with their job, that will translate into a better guest experience and happier guests, and hopefully, as a result, more business for the restaurant.

Maurice's advice to students was focused more towards the student and had four pieces of advice to give. The first piece of advice was to work in a professional kitchen for at least a year, and secondly he encouraged them to seek out educational programs doing course study to focus on the areas that they are interested in. His third piece of advice was to join as many organizations in your industry as possible in order to stay up to date and to learn who people in the industry are. His fourth piece of advice was to learn Spanish or another language that may be prevalent in the local area. These are mostly good pieces of advice, but the second one needs to be looked at more closely.

He felt that students should not go and spend a lot of money at a high priced school but rather just take courses in their area of interest. However, different people have different ways of learning, and some people will excel in the specific course study but others may not, they need something more structured. Some people just do not do well in school, so a course study or even on the job training for them would be a more viable way to go. Others need, and enjoy, the structure of school and getting a more rounded education by doing a full program. For the Hotel and Restaurant Management student at the Professional Culinary Institute they are learning all aspects of the business and industry. The student may not plan to go into hotel management or event planning but there are things to learn from these areas that could be useful to a restaurant manager. Also, by having a more rounded education there will be more career options available

³ Adam Davidson, "Q&A: Illegal Immigrants and the US Economy", March 3, 2006, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5312900>

instead of being locked into one area. A person seeking a hospitality career should examine themselves and see what works best for them.

When Brian was asked, “what do you look for when hiring someone?” he gave the first and most important thing he looked for, which was to find people with genuine hospitality; a desire to see people happy and to take care of them. But it is also the hardest trait to find when interviewing potential candidates. This answer shows his front-of-house focus on service. These are the people that are going to give the guest the best experience possible and they are the people that have the best chance to flourish and grow in the restaurant. This doesn't exclude other areas that need to be examined during the interview, but it will give the hiring manager a very good idea of what kind of employee that person will be.

Maurice had a list of items that he looked for when hiring someone, with the most important one being the first impression; was he or she professional, dressed professionally, on time, and prepared. He also looked at work history such as gaps in the employment history, and if there are, why? Did they work at a lot of restaurants in a short period of time, and if so, why? He also looks for aptitude; does this applicant have the ability to do the job? He looks for passion and drive; does the person really have a passion for this job or is he just looking for a job to make money? This is actually a good list, although his main focus is not on guests since he is back-of-house, he is concerned with getting someone who can do the job, be professional, and have passion and drive to do the best they can. This will hopefully translate into someone who is turning out good food, which in turn adds value to the restaurant and brings in more business.

Brian's response to “what do you like most about your job” was eye opening. His answer goes beyond the standard response of people and to make them happy. He said, “He enjoys the ability to meet new people and to surprise them and hopefully, make their day”. When he can surprise someone and make their day that is what makes his day. For example a guest comes in who had a hard day of work and now it's raining and they're wet. This is an opportunity to surprise them, so he may open a bottle of champagne and take them a glass, with a word to the guest that he hopes their day will get better from here on. When examined closely, this is the answer that employees serving or working with customers in the restaurant business should be able to give. He is not doing this just to make money for the restaurant; this is a genuine, deeper joy from serving people. If everyone in the restaurant has this same attitude, then the service will be terrific and the money part will come naturally as a result.

Could I see myself doing this? I have always had a heart to serve people and make people happy, although being in the technology industry for 25 years; I did not have a lot of opportunity to foster that at work. My challenge as a manager in the restaurant business will not be the desire to make people happy or the passion to serve them,

instead it will be in learning how to do it and looking for the opportunities. It is a challenge I look forward to.

He also enjoys training his staff, watching them grow and get better. This is another example of genuine hospitality that was discussed earlier. Not just serving your guests but serving the people who work for you. The thing that he likes least is the numbers, especially when those numbers interfere with people (i.e. Cutting hours, or cutting back on staff). As can be seen from the previous answers, Brian's focus is really on people and showing genuine hospitality. It seems he would rather be out with the people instead of figuring out all the numbers. This doesn't say he can't do it or doesn't do it, it just not the thing that gives him the greatest joy as the restaurant general manager.

What Maurice likes most about his job is that it is a creative outlet for him especially in the process of a menu change. He also enjoys mentoring his staff and watching them grow. Along that same line, he enjoys managing his crew and being successful at it in bringing together different cultures, personalities, and ethnicities. He also enjoys the challenges encountered on the job because he has learned to use them to help him grow in his career. The thing he least likes about his job is when he has to discipline or reprimand his staff, it disappoints him because he feels that he has not done his job properly, which is to ensure the success of each person who works for him.

I see myself enjoying the training and mentoring of staff, as both Brian and Maurice do. It is just an extension of hospitality and service to those who work for you. Being from the technology industry I enjoy numbers and figuring them out, so I would enjoy the numbers. But like both Brian and Maurice, I would not enjoy it when the numbers meant I had to layoff someone or cut their hours. I am a person who likes to see people happy, so that would not be a fun time. Because of this, the discipline of staff for issues or under-performance is something that I will have to work on because it is not something I like to do.

Both Brian and Maurice had people who influenced them or mentored them. They both were influenced by family at a young age, Brian by his parents and Maurice by his grandmother. Brian considers Randy, a manager at AP Stumps, to be a mentor. He gave Brian the opportunity in the restaurant business and also gave him his base knowledge of wine and service. Brian also has a friend who was an Executive Chef at AP Stumps who he gets together with on a regular basis. It is not a mentor relationship but more of a two way accountability relationship. They strive to make each other better by continuously questioning each other and what they are doing. Accountability to a person or group of peers can be a very effective way to grow and continually strive to be better. However, it does take a commitment to be open and honest and to allow yourself to be vulnerable.

Maurice has worked at quite a few places in his 28 year career and has worked for many other Executive Chefs. Although they weren't all mentors, he always tried to learn

something from the experience or from the chef. Whether good or bad, he felt there was always something he could take away from it to make himself better. He learned organization from Joe at Black Angus who was a former military man. From Bill at a hotel restaurant in Pleasanton, he learned to treat everyone fair and to be consistent. However, Jerry, a master chef, taught him the most. Jerry expected a lot from his staff but he always allowed people to grow. He allowed people to work in the areas they wanted to work in or learn about. He actually trained and mentored his employees so that all aspects of his job could be done by others, essentially making himself redundant.

Would Brian and Maurice make good mentors if I chose to follow their path? Brian, though young, would actually be a very good mentor for the FOH. He has a genuine joy for serving people, whether they are his guest or his employee. It would be good to learn from him how to put that desire to serve and make people happy to use properly in the hospitality industry.

Maurice would be a good mentor to learn the entire back of the house operation. He has worked in all positions, in many places, from dishwasher, to line cook, sous chef, executive chef, and other management positions and he is willing to allow others to learn as much as possible. It would also be good to learn from him how to manage a staff and learn the attitude that the management job is to help your staff grow and be happy.

Through Brian and Maurice it is seen that there is a sharp contrast in the main focus between front-of-house and back-of-house in a restaurant. The main focus of FOH are the guests and making them happy and making their visit a memorable experience, through service. The main focus of the BOH is to send out the best food possible. Their goal is still the same as FOH, to help the guest have a memorable experience, but they are using food as their medium to do this instead of service.

However, when it comes to other areas of the job there are a lot of similarities in what they do. They both are responsible for the numbers (budget, costing, pricing, etc), they both need to help determine where the restaurant is going and if any changes are needed, and they both are responsible for the training and development of their staff. As Brian and Maurice both stated, they want to see their staff grow and be happy in their jobs. They both receive joy from seeing their staff working as a team from the training and mentoring they have given to their staff. So, it seems to come down to the fact that whether you are FOH or BOH, you still need to like people and have a desire to serve them.