



IN FRONT OF THE GUEST · SEASON 1 · MODULE 5: RESTAURANT AND BARS · LESSON 21

Read the Table Before You Speak

Adapting your tone is half the service.

In five lines

Two tables order the same thing and need opposite services: the couple celebrating wants a slow pace and a sense of complicity; the guest alone with a laptop wants efficiency and space; the family with tired children wants speed and understanding. An ordinary server serves plates; a professional serves people — and to do that, before opening their mouth, they read: who these people are, what they came for, how much of a hurry they're in, how hungry they are for conversation. Ten seconds of reading decide the tip, the review and the return visit. This lesson trains that reading.

The script, step by step

- 1. The ten seconds of reading.** Before approaching: celebration or routine? Business or pleasure? First time or regulars? Tension or relaxation? Body language, clothing, the ages in the party and the time of day tell you almost everything — if you look before you recite.
- 2. Calibrate tone, pace and distance.** With the celebration: warmth, time between courses, discreet complicity. With business: precision, silence and speed with the check. With the family: agility, tolerance and a gesture toward the children that disarms the parents. The same server, three different services.
- 3. Silence is service too.** You don't interrupt an intense conversation to recite suggestions, nor ask "is everything all right?" when the guest's mouth is full. The moment to step in is chosen: between courses, in the natural pause, with your eyes before your voice.
- 4. Reread during service.** The table changes: the business dinner relaxes at the second wine; the celebration fades if bad news arrives. The professional adjusts in real time — the table's manual is written while you serve.

With limited resources: how to hold the standard

If you don't have...	How to hold the standard
Time (a full dining room, a short-staffed team)	The reading isn't cut: it speeds up. The ten seconds become three — celebration, business or family — and the basic calibration of tone is kept. Reading fast is still reading.
Experience (you're new)	Turn every table into deliberate practice: before approaching, bet silently on what kind of table it is; when you finish, check. In a month you'll have read five hundred tables — and it will show.

In front of the guest

DO	DON'T	NEVER
Look at the table before speaking to it. Choose the moment to step in. Treat children as guests, not as nuisances.	Recite the same speech to every table. Interrupt conversations or ask about everything at the worst moment.	Make comments about a table with colleagues in view of the dining room: guests don't hear — but they see. And rank tables by the tip they look likely to leave: service is not auctioned off.

Common mistakes

- ◆ Serving the manual and not the table: the standard is the floor of service, not its ceiling.
- ◆ Confusing friendliness with familiarity: complicity is offered; the guest sets the degree of closeness.
- ◆ Ignoring the invisible host: at every table there is someone who decides and pays — identify them and look after their role without neglecting the rest.
- ◆ Reading once and not rereading: the table at the start isn't the table at dessert.

THE GOLDEN RULE

**“An ordinary server serves plates.
A professional serves people.”**

This lesson's exercise

Describe how your service changes — greeting, pace, tone, the moment for the check — between these three tables: an anniversary couple, a guest alone with a laptop and a family with two exhausted children. Three columns, no theory: concrete gestures. In the answer that follows, I share my version.