Maestros of service

Meet seven practitioners of tableside artistry who elevated the dining experience in 2010

To rise to a level of excellence in any line of work requires several things. You have an obligation to master the fundamentals, then to hone the details of your craft. You need a competitive zeal that pushes you to be the very best, bolstered by passion, personality, humility and attention to detail. You learn what everyone else knows, but you take it further – asking questions, digging into books, traveling, observing, absorbing.

In our second recognition of the best restaurant servers encountered during the year, I have found seven individuals who possess all of those traits.

But to be a great server, you need even more. You must have an authentic charisma that connects with customers, whether it is low-key or effusive. Then we come to what cannot be taught: There must be something in your DNA, your very identity, that gives you tremendous satisfaction in serving people.

Each of the following servers, in no particular order,

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Dining
BLAIR ANTHONY ROBERTSON

You want service?
Then you want, clock-wise from top left,
Sarah Hermann of Formal’s Bistro,
Stacy Rodriguez of Dave & Buster’s,
Kendal Herin of Ambiance, Dino Harris of Meadowood,
Taryn Curren of Muhney’s B&L,
Leon Moore of Red Lotus and
Michael Freeman of Taste.

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Servers: 
Personality, knowledge are traits they share

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Elevated my dining experience in 2010.
In my chats with them, I asked many questions with an eye toward understanding one thing: how they got to be so good.
Their answers are instructive for practically any line of work. These outstanding individuals are eerily similar in the way they view their jobs. It was as if I were speaking to members of the same family.

TARYN CURREN, 28
Mullaney’s B&L, Sacramento
Strengths: Grew up in the business, has a passion for restaurants as a way of life.
Working at one of the highest profile restaurants in the area is serious business. Not only do you have to know the job, you have to know the food, cooking techniques, ingredients and, at a place that prides itself on farm-to-table cuisine, you even have to know the names of all those farms.
When Curren handled our table during one of our many visits, her knowledge elevated our dining experience — there’s no greater compliment. I want to be a server.
We asked plenty of questions and never came close to stumping her.
She has worked at Mullaney’s for four years and hopes to open her own restaurant someday. Her father is Bill Curren, half of the legendary duo that runs Maxie Restaurant in midtown.
Part of what makes Curren so good is attitude.

OLIN HARRIS, 47
Meadowood, St. Helena
Strengths: Knowledge, an elegance of demeanor that matches the room, people skills.
As a star waiter at a restaurant recently awarded three Michelin stars, Harris may be one of the nation’s finest servers.
He is relatively low-key, but he always seems to say the right thing at the right time. On our visit, his understanding of food and cooking was so keen that it encouraged us to sit back and have him take charge, leading us through a sensational evening of dining.
When we were told we were to visit New York and asked if he had any restaurant recommendations, he returned with a card, tucked in an envelope, with handwritten notes from the kitchen staff.
That’s the kind of little thing that makes a restaurant great, in addition to having culinary wizard Christopher Kostow at the helm in the kitchen.

KENT HEINER, 41
Ambiance, Carmichael
Strengths: Knows food and wine inside and out. Loves fine dining, and it shows in the way he talks about it.
He works at a restaurant run by Morgan Song, one of the most gifted, meticulous and artistic chefs around. So he has an obligation to know the menu.
But for Heinie, who has been a waiter since 1998, it goes way beyond that. His ability to discuss the minute details of the cuisine, the arcane ingredients in the cooking, is uncanny. It’s no surprise that his favorite book — practically his security blanket — is “Larousse Gastronomique,” one of the great tomes of the gourmet food world.

LEON MOORE, 25
Red Lotus, Sacramento
Strengths: Wine knowledge, engaging personality, belief in his restaurant’s mission.
Move to the United States from Australia in 1994 and holds dual citizenship. His father is the founder of Simply Music, which is based in Sacramento and bills itself as “the largest playing-based music education institution in the world.”

STACY RODRIGUEZ, 25
Dave & Buster’s, Roseville
Strengths: Highest personality, sincerity, ability to talk about food in detail.
Let’s get right to the point: How can a server from a chain restaurant that emphasizes video games as much as food find herself on the same list as someone from a world-class restaurant?
Simple. Rodriguez is outstanding. She truly enjoys working at Dave & Buster’s, and believes in what they’re all about.
Now she’s going to do it right and take on the layers of the flavors in the food and how it was executed. Then she’s going to do it again, and the word we hear too often from servers in the area: “Yummy.”

TASTY, PLYMOUTH
Strengths: The complete package — experience, personality, knowledge.
Freeman has worked at just about every position in the restaurant business, including owner. These days, he is content to work at the highest levels of his profession as a waiter.
Though Taste is a restaurant that does everything right, Freeman’s performance made it even better on our visit. When he was asked how he details about the ingredients — explaining, for example, the finer points of black garlic.
He talked about cooking techniques as if he had watched each dish take shape in the kitchen.

Beyond that, he possesses an easy charm, suggesting he is truly in his element when serving people.
“If you’re going to be a great server, you have to be a people person,” he said.
“Then your desire is to make the experience extraordinary for people. That’s what you’re in the business for. I try to do as much research as I can beyond what they tell us. It fascinates people, and it creates a great rapport with the customers.”
Freeman understands the great secret of fine dining — it’s about much more than food.

In this day and age, people are looking for something beyond eating. The restaurant business is very competitive. My feeling has always been that service is the most important thing,” he said. “Food is tremendously important, but people will return if they’ve had a wonderful experience with the service.”

SARAH HEIMANN, 28
Formolli’s, Portola
Strengths: Personality, passion for her craft.
It was only a matter of minutes during a visit to Formollo’s before we realized that Heimann was someone special. She came to our table and said hello — that’s all it took. Talk about charisma. She lights up the room.
Heimann is a country girl who grew up in Calaveras County. Waiting tables is actually a second job. Her main occupation is administrative assistant at a school for adults with disabilities. She then goes to work at the restaurant to satisfy the other side of her personality.
“Yeah, I think I have a good money. It’s a job. But I really enjoy being there. It’s incredibly satisfying, and it’s a perfect balance for me,” she said.
Heimann is a close friend of the restaurant’s owners, the husband and wife team of Suzanne Ricci and Aimal Formollo. The neighborhood bistro is a great success story, in part because of the consistently good service.
But fine dining in a casual atmosphere presents its own challenges for servers. They must be professional but not haughty, efficient but not hurried and knowledgeable and not snobby. Formollo’s is one place that nails this balance.

Last year, we applauded Formollo’s Kristina Gonzales; this year, it’s Heimann. We’re beginning to think there is something about that place we really admire.

Call The Bee’s Blair Anthony Robertson, (916) 321-1069.