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A HOSTING INTERVENTION

Can you learn to be a better entertainer?

One less-than-stellar host enrolls in a five-star hotel's rigorous training program to find out.

BY SYLVIE BIGAR

"I WOULDN'T SERVE this to a guest," said Executive Chef Matthew Zubrod. Things weren't off to a good start.

Last December, after another train-wreck holiday week during which I forgot to serve the roasted cauliflower I'd stored in the microwave, left beds unmade, and absentmindedly threw out the fresh bouquet of flowers my boyfriend had bought me, it became clear I needed a hosting intervention.

Truth was, I had left my parents' home years ago, but even though I loved to entertain and cowrote star chef Daniel Boulud's cookbook, I never really learned the basics: Cook breakfast, make a bed, be a good hostess.

I remembered that a friend worked at the Little Nell, a five-star hotel in Aspen, Colorado, renowned for its stellar service. She had moaned about the exhausting training but later mentioned that this kind of program could be beneficial to anyone running a household.

"What if I could sit in on their staff training course?" I thought.

A few months later, there I was, in the Little Nell's kitchen wearing chef whites. I had just gone through an omelet-making session with breakfast cook Fredy Manzano. I was feeling pretty secure: The only thing my French mother had taught me to cook was, in fact, a runny omelet. My masterpiece, stuffed with roasted vegetables and pride, strutted on the plate.

But as soon as Zubrod walked in, he grimaced. Next to mine, Manzano's specimen was a bright yellow, solid quasi calzone of egg perfection, while my baby oozed some and harbored brown spots.

"The secret of a French omelet is clarified butter and no spots," whispered Manzano, trying to make me feel better. It didn't work.

OVER THE NEXT THREE days at the Little Nell, I shadowed the heads of housekeeping, food and beverage, and guest services, joining the incoming staff as they sailed through rigorous hospitality training sessions offered by Forbes Travel Guide, the organization that bestows star ratings on hotels, restaurants, and spas around the world. Stars are based on up to 900 standards; many of the standards are related to service but can also include things like the quality and style of linens.

"Congratulations! You made it!" announced Megan Torrance, the executive trainer, as she welcomed us. I shrank in my chair, feeling like an impostor.

This first session began with a discussion of how staff members can connect with guests on a deep level. The key, I learned that morning, is to be genuinely interested in the person's response, whether you're hosting a celebrity, as the Little Nell often does, or your ex-mother-in-law. Instead of the generic "How was your day, Mr. Smith?" be specific and personal: "Did you have fun skiing with your son today, Mr. Smith?"

Stepping into the rooms, I felt surrounded by a brume of serenity, a far cry from my own bedroom, where books and papers lie on my dresser for weeks, awaiting an elusive lift to the office one flight up. I was determined to learn to create this intangible feeling.

My bed-making session started bright and early the next day with Lindsay Ball, the hotel's housekeeping and health-center manager. Two young staff members prepared to demonstrate.

"Go," blurted Ball, her eye on her watch.

It was like watching a silent film on fast-forward. Pulling the sheets off and sliding all four pillows out

of their cases, they stripped the bed in about three seconds. They bounced on it, pulling out microfiber rags and stretching up to wipe the top of the bed frame.

Back on their feet, new pillowcases barely unfolded, bam! Their arms chopped down onto the length of the pillows for added fluff and flair before one hand pinched the top corners while the other opened the case, using gravity to shake the pillow inside.

The four pillows flew onto an armchair, and the bottom sheet was already unfolded, then pulled, tucked, and smoothed until it was like a second skin. Then the second sheet was pulled crisply to the top of the bed.

A few more seconds and the down duvet glided into its own case, four hands dancing an elaborate move during which the duvet and the case became one. Then the women placed it on the bed, folded top sheet and duvet together twice, and flattened the whole thing.

In just a few minutes, the bed was ready for a photo shoot, but just watching the process had exhausted me. I could have used a nap right there. I scribbled furiously in my notebook, trying to remember all the steps.

"This afternoon," Ball said in an ominous tone, "we will see what you learned."

I HAD LEFT MY PARENTS' HOME YEARS AGO, BUT I NEVER REALLY LEARNED THE BASICS: COOK BREAKFAST, MAKE A BED, BE A GOOD HOSTESS.

Needless to say, my own bed-making practice did not go very well. I forgot to pinch the corners of the pillow before attempting to slide it into the case and got both arms stuck. I fudged my way through tucking the sheet under the mattress and almost fell into the immense duvet cover. But at least I had a road map.

LATER, WE MET AGAIN in a guest room—this one purposefully rearranged by Torrance for practicing an evening turndown session. What a mess she had left! There were wrinkled clothes on a chair, rolled-up receipts on the bed, and the contents of a toiletry bag left strewn, tops off, on the vanity. Yes, the room had to be cleaned, but I was after the details, the tiny fixes that prevent stress. How many times had I searched for a hair dryer before finding it tucked away in a drawer, its cord

completely knotted? How about placing it in the open, ready for use by the nearest outlet?

"Everything has to be straight and organized," said Torrance, noting that this wasn't done just for looks but also for convenience. Symmetry, I learned, creates a sense of coziness. Books on both nightstands were aligned neatly, close to the lamps, and a watch was lined straight against a small pad of paper.

"Make sure the pillows smile," said Maureen Wall, the housekeeping and health-center director. "Had I missed that step?" I thought. She meant for someone to pull on both top corners at the same time. The pillows straightened up and certainly seemed happier.

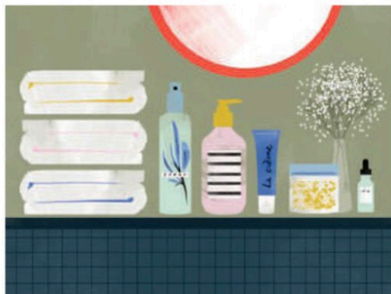
We organized toiletries from big to small, labels facing forward. Cords were neatly coiled.

"Hamburger or hot dog?" Wall asked all of a sudden, handing me a towel. I am a total carnivore but had never been offered a burger in a bathroom.

"Uh, I'll take a hot dog," I said, figuring it would be less messy than a burger.

Laughing, Ball patiently showed how to fold a towel. Starting with the long side (hamburger-style), I folded the towel in half, then in half again, before rolling it. Starting with the short side (hot-dog-style), I folded and rolled. Either way, I was starving by the end.

BACK IN THE KITCHEN. I peeked into the walk-in where the chefs kept the pickled produce and semiprepared items. I admired how the duck breast was aged in its own fat, so I asked to taste the dish. The meat was delicious, but I was more fascinated by the assemblage. The next day, I met with Andrew Hawkins, the general manager of the hotel's restaurant, Element 47.



"There are a few rules to follow when plating such a dish," he said. "First, odd numbers of items on a plate look better." We plated five asparagus. Surprisingly, the odd number was more visually appealing.

"You need a high and tight," he suddenly said to me. I knew my curls needed reining in, but I wasn't ready for that drastic a step. "On the plate," clarified Hawkins. "Height is more pleasing to the eye than width."

SYMMETRY, I LEARNED, CREATES A SENSE OF COZINESS. BOOKS ON BOTH NIGHTSTANDS WERE ALIGNED NEATLY.

We started with the sauce at the bottom, then assembled the five pieces of asparagus over it, finally adding meat sliced to show off the colors created by the sear. Hawkins made use of the white space in an artistic way, plating the dish toward the side of the plate rather than in the middle. I worried the food was getting cold. "In most cases, cook your protein last," he said. "Except on Thanksgiving!"

Watching the interactions between the guests and staff at dinner, I wondered what makes a great guest. When I had a chance to ask the hotel's general manager, Jonathan Fillman, he said it's the guest who is open with staff. "A great guest is someone who lets us in," he said. "Someone who tells us what he or she is going through so we can be there for them." He told me about a woman who happened to mention she was afraid of heights. So Fillman took her rock climbing on his day off. She has become a regular, and the two are still friends.

AFTER SPENDING TIME WITH the professionals at the Little Nell, it was clear I would never have made the cut. A lifetime of practice—making beds, plating dishes, helping guests feel cared for—awaited me.

But back home a few days later, I saw my surroundings in a completely different way. I noticed my pillows were ridiculously flat and ordered fluffy ones. I ran around my bed, pulling on the sheets so hard that one corner kept popping off the mattress—but in the end, the bed finally looked "made." At a dinner for friends, I sprinkled a few edible flowers on the salad. Suddenly, creating a lovely atmosphere within my home was a choice, not a chore. And that made all the difference.