

Waiters, Tipping and the Graveyard Shift

07.12.2018, Episode 7

A Thousand Words

Hi. Welcome to the podcast for December 7th, 2018.

Do you tip at restaurants? Do you give waiters and waitresses extra money, more than what you pay for the food and drinks? I've seen people here round up the amount – if it's 58.50, they usually round up to 60. But there's no obligation to do that. The job the waiter does is included in the price of eating at the restaurant. People here voted on [1] that about thirty years ago, I'm told. I know that waiters don't earn [2] a lot, but it's more than they do where I come from.

Today I'll be talking about restaurants and waiters and tipping and working late into the night.

Before I came to Switzerland, I worked as a waiter in different restaurants in California. The money wasn't great, but I could survive on it [3] because of the tips. Without the tips, there was no way – not on the minimum salary the restaurants paid every month for the hours I worked.

In California, like all over the US, waiters calculate into their monthly salary the tips they expect to get from customers. Just like here, there's no law that says anyone has to tip. But over there, we all do it. No initiative was ever made. We never voted for or against it. We've all just been trained to do it. We all know how badly most people in the service industries [4] are paid. We know that restaurants make customers responsible for [5] helping out waiters' salaries. It's a little bit like when you drive in France or Italy. You pay when you use different parts of the road. You don't pay everywhere, but you do pay, just a little, in specific places. It's the same with tipping. You don't tip everywhere – not at fast food places or post offices.

The restaurants are there, just like the roads are there. They're filled with food and drinks, and you ask for these things for the prices that are written on the menu.

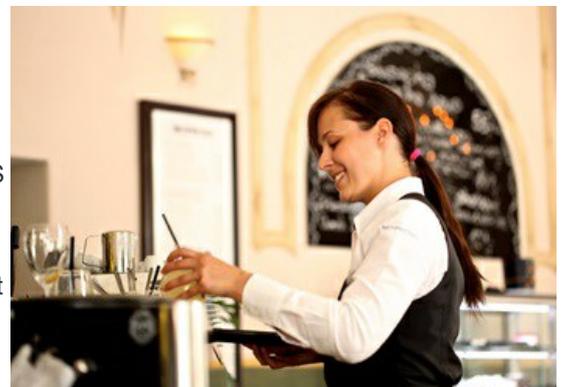
But you can't just go into the kitchen and get your own food from the cooks when it's ready. You have to wait for the waiter to bring it to you. For this service, you tip. On French and Italian roads if you want the barrier [6] to go up, you pay to have them lift it up for you so you can drive on. There's no such physical barrier at the door of a restaurant in the US when you want to leave - the barrier there is a social one.

I read that tipping only started in the US a little over a hundred years ago. There was a company that built train cars you could sleep in. They hired mostly ex-slaves [7] and didn't pay them very much. Then they wrote in newspapers that their workers weren't able to live on the salary they earned but needed the help of customers. The Pullman Company, they were called, and they were the first big US company to start this custom [8]. Other industries, like restaurants and hotels, followed [9]. And the public, over generations, accepted it.

What's not so well-known outside the US is that waiters and waitresses there must declare on their taxes about 8 percent of the total amount of food and drink they serve. So not only do waiters not earn much per hour, they also have to pay taxes that the government imagines they will earn. So if you don't give a tip, waiters must still declare it as money they earned.

It's not easy working as a waiter in the US. Most restaurants will only hire [10] a waiter who has waiting experience. But it's a catch-22 [11] situation. How do you get experience if you won't be hired because you don't have any in the first place? The US isn't known for its apprenticeship [12] system. So in the case of waiters, those without experience are often put on the graveyard shift [13].

That's where I started. Ever heard of the graveyard shift? Sounds spooky [14], like a final resting place for the dead. In the US, we



have a lot of restaurants open all night long, or long into the night. The graveyard shift begins at 10 or 11 at night and goes till 6 or 7 or sometimes even 8 in the morning. It's a time of day – or rather night – when people are more understanding if you make mistakes. The graveyard shift, in some ways, is like an apprenticeship for some companies; it's a time not so critical to learn the job while on the job.

The first restaurant I worked at was a beach diner [15] in Southern California. They closed for only one hour, from 5 to 6 in the morning so they could clean their grill. I was trained there by a middle-aged ex-surfer. His sink-or-swim philosophy [16] was the same that most parents in California use to teach their babies how to swim – drop them in water before they're 9 months old and let their instinct do the rest. He was a cool dude [17], very casual, but he did give me some helpful advice. "If a drunken customer wants to punch [18] you in the face," he told me, "let them; they usually feel bad after and leave a better tip." He also showed me the fine art of setting things down on tables – not to let them hit the table loudly, but to use your little finger, your pinkie [19], to touch down quietly first and then ease [20] them down.

The graveyard was a great place to start my career. Like I said, there wasn't any of that usual pressure of needing to do things perfectly, or fast, or even efficient. People who eat their meals at normal times a day have more of a need for this kind of service. Not so for people who come into a beach diner after 11 pm. And when the bars close at 2 am, the drunks come stumbling in [21] for more drinks or warm food or coffee to sober up [22]. These people aren't always so aware of how long it takes their food to come, or if you drop some of it on them, or even if it's what they ordered.

When I left the beach diner and moved up to San Francisco, I took my graveyard experience with me and worked at a restaurant whose customers had different expectations. They came in, sat down and asked:

"Your omelettes – I imagine the chickens are local?"

"Yes."

"How big is the space they can move around in?"

Or:

"Are your potatoes organic [23]?"

"Yes, they are."

"Is that Northern California organic or just organic?"

"Organic."

"Oh."

Or:

"How much is the restaurant powered by solar energy?"

"Uhhh... I'll get back to you before dessert."

"Is what you wash your dishes with bad for local water sources?"

"Where is your furniture produced?"

"What do you do with leftover food [24]? Do you give it to the homeless, or do you just throw it away?"

As I said, it's not easy being a waiter in the US.

Thanks for listening.

You can find all our episodes on our website podclub.ch or by downloading our app. You can also download our vocabulary trainer to help you practice the new words you hear, and you can follow me on Instagram.

I'll be back on December 21st to talk about wildfires in California.

Bye for now.

Glossar: A Thousand Words

[1] voted on: when the public is asked to say yes or no to something

[2] earn: work you do for a salary

[3] survive on it: live from the salary

[4] **service industries:** businesses that work for customers, like restaurants and hotels

[5] **make customers responsible for:** make the customers take care of

[6] **the barrier:** the long, thin object that, when lowered, stops cars from driving forward

[7] **ex-slaves:** people who no longer work for another person for free

[8] **custom:** a normal way of doing things ; a habit

[9] **followed:** did the same thing

[10] **hire:** here: give someone a job

[11] **a catch-22:** an impossible situation, where you can't do something because you must first do another thing which you can't do if you haven't done the first

[12] **an apprenticeship:** a system of learning a job while working

[13] **graveyard shift:** a period of working time during the night

[14] **spooky:** scary

[15] **a diner:** a small, casual restaurant

[16] **sink-or-swim philosophy:** putting someone into a situation and having the person learn by themselves

[17] **a dude:** a regular, normal man

[18] **to punch:** to hit with a closed hand

[19] **pinkie:** the little finger on both hands

[20] **to ease down:** to move lower very carefully and gently

[21] **come stumbling in:** to walk in almost falling down

[22] **to sober up:** no longer be drunk

[23] **organic:** food produced without chemicals

[24] **leftover food:** the rest of food that is not completely eaten