

# Tipping Point

**Scene 1:** I'm out with three female friends, celebrating one of their birthdays with dinner at a good restaurant. The conversation is lively, the wine is flowing, and the food is delicious. Our waiter is charming and professional. When it comes time to pay the bill, we do our best with our presbyopic eyes in the dim light to discern what we owe, and pay accordingly.

Transaction complete, the waiter helps with our coats and escorts us to the door with profuse thanks, bows and invitations to come again. As we meander up the street, we eventually figure out that with the combined forces of our bad math skills, we've given the waiter an almost 50 per cent tip. And we thought it was the combined forces of our stunning beauty that had him so enchanted.

Laughing hysterically, we figure, What the hell, it's nearly Christmas, and he was an excellent waiter. No harm done.

**Scene 2:** Out with three friends again for another celebration, at another restaurant. It's busy, and we've been given an awkwardly placed table near the windy entrance. Our server is stiff and frosty, rhyiming off the specials in a bored Valley girl style ("Our entree is, urn, Chilean sea bass?"), and is a bit impatient with questions we ask, and which she can't answer.

At no time does she crack a smile. We notice that we are about 20 years older than most of the other diners. And that the server is lavishing much friendlier attention on a table of flirtatious young men in a cozy corner, and a mixed group of model-esque types at yet another nicely placed table.

Even as she lays down our plates (with no apologies or even an acknowledgement when she gets them entirely mixed up, making us feel it's somehow our fault), she's craning her neck toward the men and the models.



## The worst fate that could befall us was serving a table full of elderly ladies on a bus trip from Buffalo, who would demand much, and tip little.

My friends don't know what to make of the persistent rudeness, but I do. Many moons ago, I used to wait tables, and the sad truth was, female diners - particularly older ones - had a bad reputation as lousy tippers.

Back then (Toronto's Ontario Place, *circa* the early '80s), we all thought the worst fate that could befall us was a table of elderly ladies on a bus trip from Buffalo, who would demand much, and tip little. Far better prospects from an after-sporting-event load of men, or a group of male business associates, competitively wielding company credit cards.

So here it is, 2008, and I'm getting the unfortunate feeling that in the eyes of this young woman, my forty something friends and I are unhip oldsters hardly worth the trouble, certainly far less interesting than men and models, and in her mind, likely lousy tippers.

## WHO IS THE MOST GENEROUS WHEN IT COMES TO MONEY FOR SERVICE – MEN OR WOMEN, YOUNG OR, ER, MATURE? MOIRA FARR INVESTIGATES

But is it true? Haven't women come a long way by now, in terms of income, independence and exposure to both sides of the service industry table?

Certainly in my own circle, we err on the side of generosity. Most of us have worked as servers at some time in our lives, and therefore know what a tough job it is, and how low the actual earnings are. Good wait staff deserve their tips.

Besides, as one friend of mine puts it, "I hate the thought of being seen to be cheap."

All the more galling, then, to think that a Scrooge-like reputation should unfairly precede us into the restaurants where we occasionally gather and, with few exceptions, tip well.

How do today's servers view the middle-aged female customer, anyway? I conducted a casual poll, and learned that age is more of a tipoff than gender. A number of waiters suggested that *seniors* do tend to skimp on the tip; a generation that grew up in the Depression, perhaps, views money differently, and may also genuinely have less of it to throw around.

"I used to work at Swiss Chalet [in St. Catharines, Ont.], so I am sure you can imagine the majority of the tables I served included elderly ladies," says 22-year-old former waiter Miranda Voth. "I have been left quarters on many occasions and have been told to save for something pretty.

"For the record," she adds, "I think the older men were just as cheap."

Former server and Kelsey's hostess Jessica Lockhart agrees. "I have never found that women tip worse [than men]." When Lockhart, 24, waited tables through several summers at a northern Alberta inn, she found that women complained more than men when they came in groups: The fish would be too fishy, the service too slow; once, a woman complained that Lockhart had interrupted a conversation to take the table's order. "I honestly think it's a product of women being catty and judgmental when in a group, whereas men like to flirt with female servers."

Interestingly, when it came to couples, she says, the odds were even on whether the man or the woman was the bad tipper - and which one of the couple would slink back and leave more for the tip, with apologies for the bad behaviour of the other.

Male or female, server or customer, one problem surrounding the tipping issue is the confusion that arises about exactly what amount constitutes a fair and decent tip - especially in an age of multiple and fluctuating taxes. According to Edmonton-based etiquette expert Joanne Blake, "You should tip 15 per cent of the pre-tax total, 20 per cent for fine dining or exceptional service."

If that sounds too steep, it's probably best that you avoid dining out too often. Blake, along with her husband, runs a company called Style for Success, which counsels business clients on, among other matters of etiquette, social dining, and has produced an online video resource entitled Dining for Success. "It's about being well mannered and respectful to the server," she says.

And if the service isn't good? "We always suggest you be pro active, leave the table and tell the maitre d' what's going south, and give him an opportunity to redeem the problem."



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If service doesn't improve after you've politely made your complaint to both the server and the manager, "you may leave less of a tip, and know that they will not make the assumption that you're cheap, but that you weren't happy with the service."

Blake also suggests that if you are, or want to be, a restaurant regular, you phone the management later and explain what happened. Perhaps it's a case of poor training - not an unusual situation in Alberta's booming economy, where the service industry is starved for experienced staff, Blake points out.

But what if the service was good, and you notice that the person paying for the meal has skimmed on the tip? "If it's a client, I wouldn't get involved," says Blake, "but if it's a friend or family member, you can discreetly return to the table and top up the amount."

Fortunately, my friends and I find that most of the time, we don't feel we're being pre-judged as parsimonious old biddies. I can count more good service stories than bad ones; only once did a friend and I leave no tip, in a beautiful waterside restaurant in San Antonio, Tex., after being served by a waiter who was so outrageously nasty we thought we should leave surreptitiously so she wouldn't follow us to our hotel and murder us.

In any case, we can't do much to change the fact that a server in her twenties may view anyone over 40 as a fossil (and a tight-fisted one at that). But, as Blake points out, we can be assertive (not abusive) if the service is poor; tip according to, or above, the standard expected amount for good service; and respect our servers and the hard job they do, as we would have them respect us.

We're not out of style, and neither are good manners. At our age, we know what they are.

Bon appétit.  
Moira Farr