

A Critic At Every Table

My Week as a Waiter

By Frank Bruni

IT'S 7:45 p.m., the East Coast Grill is going full tilt and I'm ready to throttle one of the six diners at Table M-8.

He wants me to describe the monkfish special. For the fourth time. I hoarsely oblige, but when I return yet again to my riff on the apricot lager mustard, which comes right before my oratorical ode to the maple pecan mashed sweet potatoes, his attention flags and he starts to talk to a friend.

Does he mistake me for a recorded message, paused and played with the push of a button? Doesn't he know I have other tables to serve?

I need to go over and massage the mood at R-5, where one of the two diners has a suspiciously shallow pool of broth in her bouillabaisse, perhaps because I spilled some of it near M-2.

And I need to redeem myself with the two diners at X-9, who quizzed me about what the restaurant had on tap and received a blank stare in response. I'm supposed to remember the beers? Along with everything about the monkfish, these oddly coded table references, more than 10 wines by the glass and the provenance of the house oysters?

I had no idea.

I usually spend my nights on the other side of the table, not only asking the questions and making the demands but also judging and, I concede, taking caustic little mental notes. And it's been 20 years since I walked in a waiter's shoes, something I did for only six months.

But last week I traded places and swapped perspectives, a critic joining the criticized, to get a taste

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