2265 The Service Trap

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Good service, by itself, is forgettable. It's the table stakes — the minimum requirement for staying in business. It's what every corporate chain delivers, by design, at every location, every day. Efficient, predictable, and utterly unremarkable.

The restaurants that pack the house — the ones with waitlists, the ones that get recommended, the ones people drive past ten other options to reach — have figured out something that good service alone never delivers. They've figured out how to make people feel something.

There is a version of this trap that is more sophisticated and harder to identify. I have seen coaches in this industry hold up efficiency as the ultimate standard — describing a meal where "fifty-five minutes went by and we never needed anything" as evidence of exceptional service. The table was so well maintained, nothing was ever required. Nobody interrupted. Nothing was missing.

That sounds like success. Look closer.

A Guest who goes fifty-five minutes without needing a thing might be having the experience of their life. Or they might have been so quietly, efficiently managed — with such professional detachment — that they stopped expecting anything more. There is a meaningful difference between a Guest who needs nothing because every need was anticipated before it could form, and a Guest who needs nothing because the standard of connection was low enough that no real interaction was ever generated. One is hospitality. The other is indifference with clean execution.

The restaurants I worry about most are not the ones with bad service. They are the ones so technically clean that nobody noticed the Guest was invisible.

Underneath this trap there is often a business model driving it. Operators who optimize aggressively for table turns — who measure success in covers per shift, who watch the clock from the moment a party is seated — are making a choice that reads as smart on a spreadsheet and plays out as corrosive in a dining room.

Fast table turns may help the revenue line. They are not good for the Guest. And what is not good for the Guest is not good for business. When your team internalizes that the goal is moving the

table, they stop being hosts and start being traffic directors. The check arrives early. The dessert conversation is rushed. The warmth disappears about ten minutes before the Guest was ready to leave.

Guests notice. Not always consciously. But they feel the shift from we want you here to we need your table. That feeling — more than the food, the price point, or the décor — is what they carry out the door.

Optimize for the Guest. The turns will follow.