

They Steal Napkins, Don't They?

(And That's Just a Start)

By DONNA PAUL

The impulse to take things is powerful, and complicated. Suzanne Goin, the chef at Lucques in Los Angeles, says customers think that because they're spending money it is acceptable for them to take what they want. They may want a souvenir of the evening, like the woman at Ten Penh, or a thrill, or even a measure of revenge, if they were unhappy with the experience.

Restaurants figure on losing 2 to 3 percent of their "service ware" over the course of a year, said Arlene Spiegel, the president of Arlene Spiegel & Associates, a food and beverage consulting firm in Manhattan.

Most chefs agree that theft contributes to the rising cost of menu prices -- though not enormously. They chalk it up to the cost of doing business, something that's more of a constant nuisance than a serious dollar issue. The items stolen aren't usually worth enough to submit an insurance claim, let alone a crime report. And even when they are, restaurateurs tend not to. Not one of the dozens interviewed for this article has ever prosecuted a customer for theft.

Preventing theft, said Stephen Zagor, the director of management programs at the Institute for Culinary Education in New York, is a matter of vigilance. "Keeping a watchful eye," he said. Without the customer noticing, of course. "We teach our managers-to-be or our owners-to-be to impart a feeling of ownership to the waiters."

For example, what seems to be a gracious act of service -- the tuxedo-clad waiter wielding a pepper mill the size of a baseball bat -- is more likely a restaurateur's attempt to prevent theft of pepper mills that once sat on the table, Mr. Meyer said.

Bradley Ogden, the Northern California restaurateur, makes the waiters responsible for retrieving the small saucepans he uses to serve some dishes at his new restaurant, Parcel 104, in Santa Clara. He figures that the pans are likely targets, and says making the waiters feel responsible gives them "ownership mentality."



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It isn't just the waiters who are watching, either. The bathroom attendant is there to do more than hand out towels, and those video cameras restaurants have begun installing to monitor service also help keep an eye on customers.

"It is obviously a theft issue, but it's also a security issue," Ms. Spiegel said of the cameras and attendants. "No one will come forward and tell you it's a theft issue."

Restaurant designers are becoming more aware of creating "control points," she said, meaning that expensive objects are placed where someone is always nearby. Steve Hanson, the owner of Blue Water Grill, Blue Fin and other Manhattan restaurants, uses antitheft hinges to bolt all artwork to the walls and glues down other pieces of art.

Ms. Spiegel knows of a restaurant that went to a cheaper napkin once they began noticing that they always came back with fewer Frette napkins than they put out.

"It's a collection of things that devalue the overall dining experience," Ms. Spiegel said, "and I think at this time, in this economic climate, restaurants are really looking at these ways to save money."

Finally, many restaurateurs have decided the best strategy is to simply go into the housewares business themselves.