

makes as much as \$100,000 a year. "That's how you keep the best waiters," says Puck.

### Speed and personality

CAREER waiters know that every restaurant has its own service style that suits its clientele. At lunch at the Grill on the Alley in Beverly Hills last week, Warren Beatty and media mogul Barry Diller were entertaining Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) when in came deposed California Gov. Gray Davis, sans reservation. With such wattage already commanding the coveted booths, Davis was relegated to no-man's land in the middle of the restaurant. How to salvage the pride of the former governor? The Grill sent James "Big Jim" Marx to be his waiter.

Although the basics of seamless service are the same at every good restaurant, the emphasis at the Grill is on speed and personality.

Many of the Grill's regulars specifically request Marx, 51, who gets many of the most demanding customers, says Bob Spivak, one of the founders of the restaurant and chief executive of the parent company, the Grill Concepts.

"People really appreciate his dry wit," says Spivak. Marx, a big man whose jacket sleeves never quite cover his long arms, isn't a slapstick funny guy. He just seems to arrive at tables at the exact moment when the group needs a wry observation.

Marx's no-nonsense personality matches the place: clubby, chatty and not easily impressed. Waiters don't last at the Grill, Marx says, if they don't mesh into the fabric of the place.

The wait stall is what keeps a restaurant together, according to Brad Metzger, a former waiter and founder of the employment firm Restaurant Solutions. "That's what makes an amazing restaurant: the teamwork, the syncopation with each other." Ambitious waiters network through headhunters like Metzger.

Other waiters follow a favorite manager to a new restaurant. But mostly, they rely on word of mouth. After their night shifts, they unwind — and trade news of openings — at late-night spots such as Grace, Dolce and Jozu — or even an IHOP.

Although scouting rival restaurants for serving talent is considered a serious faux pas ("It's kind of poaching," said Tracy Spillane, general manager at Spago), the grapevine is also vital to chefs and restaurant managers who need to beef up their staffs.

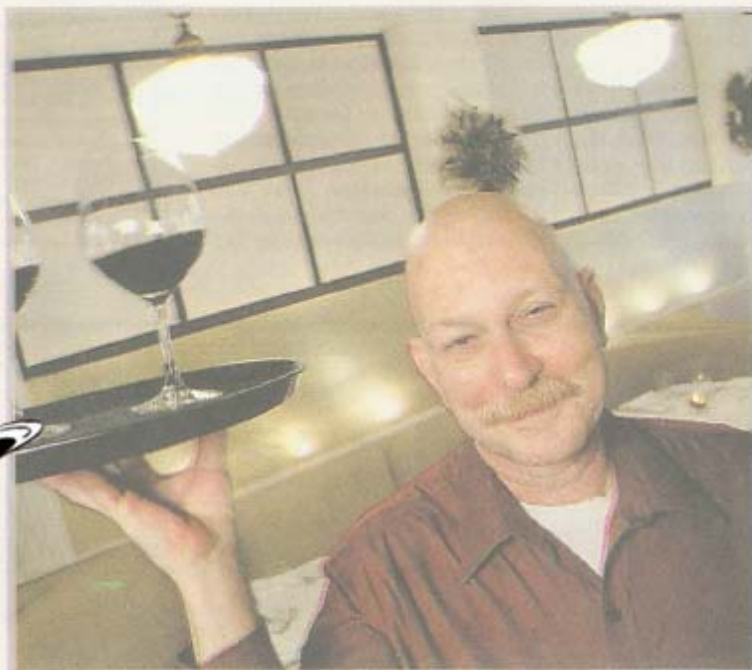
"L.A. is a real networking town," says Michael O'Day, the headwaiter at Table 8. "I guess it's a trickle-down effect from the entertainment industry."

O'Day was happily ensconced as a waiter at A.O.C. when his former boss, Chadwick's chef Govind Armstrong, happened to sit at his table. O'Day respected and enjoyed working with Armstrong before Chadwick's closed. He let the chef know he'd come back. Now he's headwaiter at the Melrose Avenue hot spot, practicing his own brand of service. "He's really good at being able to read his customers," says Armstrong.

By some measures, O'Day breaks ev-



**PERSONAL TOUCH:** Ralf Kindler, a waiter at Lucques and A.O.C., has a talent for remembering



ANNE CUNACK Los Angeles Times

**UNCONVENTIONAL:** Michael O'Day of Table 8 breaks rules, but when he touches a diner's shoulder, it just seems to work.



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**SERIOUS:** "It's my waiting job," C

ery rule in the waiters' handbook. A true believer in the personal touch, when addressing clients he lightly touches them on the arm or shoulder.

"I know a lot of managers say you shouldn't do it because you're going into their personal space," he says. For him, it works. But that's not all. Like Romeo proposing to a hungry Juliet, he gets down on bended knee to take orders.

"I've always done it," says the 56-year-old. "It gives you that more personal contact. I say there is no such thing as 'proper' service. Proper service is whatever the customer needs."

Sometimes that means telling them what to order.

"It's your job to introduce them to something new," he says. Request a standard Chardonnay, and he'll urge you to try a more interesting Riesling.

"If you don't like it, I'll take it back," he promises.

Caroline Styne, who co-owns Lucques and A.O.C., says she looks for waiters who were trained in Europe because, she says, "they definitely take service more seriously there."

That's why she appreciates Ralf Kindler, a German-trained waiter, who works at both of her restaurants.

"He can look at a person coming in the door and tell you when they ate [at the restaurant], what they ate and what his conversation was with them," says Styne.

Such personalized information — the kind that restaurants use computer programs like Open Table to track — is essential to keeping regulars pleased.

When he's not working his pick of dinner shifts at Lucques or A.O.C., Kin-

dlar is reading for or dining out. He's zanne Goin test "Next to the most expensive is go Kindler, 47.

"All of my best passionate about "They go out and They absorb the server knows the is able to sell it well buy it because i hanced experience

And, waiters ki moment. A good r leave as much as a reer waiters can 20% and 25% cons \$65,000 per year fo twice that for th