

Who's the Lucky One?

A toast to creative customer service

BY PAUL KNOWLES

A good friend of mine loves to tell this story about dining out in a northern Italian town. He and his wife had just arrived in Italy, and they forgot for the moment the Italian habit of dining late. They arrived at the restaurant to find the door locked, and the staff seated for their pre-opening meeting. But the owner spotted my friends peering through the window. He rushed over, opened the door, welcomed them in, brushed off their apologies for being half an hour early, and seated them at a table. He explained to my friends that they were, indeed, too early for immediate food service, but they were very welcome, none the less. He produced wine, bread, olive oil, some antipasto, and urged them to relax and enjoy themselves.

That was the beginning of one of their best evenings in Italy.

And that is the difference good, creative service can make. I was reminded of this a week ago as I spent a day visiting wineries in the Niagara Peninsula. It's a great way to spend a day, in a beautiful part of our province, but I confess that the reception afforded me varied wildly, winery to winery.

In some of the establishments I visited, the pretentious message was very clear: "You are very lucky to be here with us."

In others, they got it right: "We are very lucky to have you here with us." Those were the wineries that reminded me of my friends' experience in Italy.

I am a sucker for good service. I love being treated well; I love enthusiastic, friendly service people.

During my wine-tasting excursion, I found more good service than bad, and in a few cases, I encountered people ready and willing to go the extra 100 kilometers. At Crown Bench Estates, for example, winemaker Peter Kocsis was thrilled to talk about his wines, and equally happy to offer tastings of the best of his products. No charge for the tastings, by the way.

Same kind of attitude at Ridgepoint Wines, where the attitude of the people sparkles, and the wines are wonderful. You leave Ridgepoint feeling – to steal an old motto from an entirely different business – like a somebody.

As much as I love wine, it is not the beverage that brings the smile to my lips on these occasions; it is the friendly, helpful, attentive attitude of the staff. When I recommend my favourite wineries, I base my opinions at least as much on the welcome and the service I have received, as on the quality of the wines. So I eagerly tell friends to visit Fielding Estate Winery, where staffers rush to open the door, offer free tastings of any-

thing they sell, and engage in friendly conversations. Or Palatine Hills Estate Winery, where owner David Hojnoski has, at harvest time, invited me out back to sample the varieties of fresh-picked grapes.

Then there are the places where I am essentially viewed as a walking credit card.

There are plenty of wineries where service is king. Many of them are smaller operations, working hard to attract customers, and doing it right. But some of the larger wineries have not lost those people skills – places like the beautiful Vineland Estates, where the staff is incredibly helpful, and where the posted fee for wine tasting is generally ignored, especially if you buy some wine.



PAUL KNOWLES IS ASSOCIATE EDITOR OF EXCHANGE MAGAZINE ; HE IS AN AUTHOR, PUBLIC SPEAKER, & OWNER OF ENGLISH GARDEN PUBLISHERS. email: pknowles@golden.net

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