

Awards for Excellence - Restaurant Judging

This article has been provided to us by the Chair of Judges for the THA Awards for Excellence restaurant judging. We hope you will find it useful.

Each year the Tasmanian Hospitality Association (THA) in conjunction with the Australian Hotels Association (AHA) and Restaurant & Caterers Association of Australia (RCA) conducts annual Awards for Excellence in the hospitality industry. In 2011 there were entries received from 55 venues for dining categories alone. The THA offers awards in nine RCA dining categories as well as the AHA award for best counter meal/bistro. The most popular category is best informal dining with 15 nominations received. There is also a significant number of entries in the Best Restaurant in a Hotel/Motel category and the Best Contemporary Australian Restaurant. Other categories include Fine Dining, European Restaurant, Asian Restaurant and Seafood Restaurant amongst others.

The 2011 awards were judged in February and March. 17 judges and evaluators were appointed by the chief judge to assess restaurants in all parts of the state. All restaurants are judged anonymously by a judge and an evaluator (a judge usually has more experience in assessing restaurants and has the final say if issues arise as to scoring). As mentioned in articles published in this magazine (accessible on the THA website, Awards for Excellence page) last year the mechanism for judging restaurants is quite sophisticated. Unlike many other restaurant awards, which are usually the subjective view of an experienced food writer/critic, the THA awards are judged objectively.

The judges use a form developed by the RCA several years ago and subsequently refined. This form seeks to judge a restaurant in all the relevant aspects of the dining experience. These include Pre-table, covering such things as the greeting on arrival, the level of help to and at the table and the presentation of the menu and wine list. In the Pre-eating category the quality of the crockery, cutlery and glassware is assessed, as are the decor and overall atmosphere of the restaurant, while the menu is assessed for its physical quality.

The variety of dishes, whether the menu caters for vegetarians and the degree of innovation and originality of the dishes are all assessed in this category.

The next category is overall food evaluation. Obviously the quality of food served at the restaurant is of critical importance to the overall dining experience. The criteria used here are more heavily weighted in the scoring system and attempt to assess the overall quality of the food used. Here freshness of all the ingredients is a critical factor, the quality of presentation, level of taste satisfaction, integration of the components of the various dishes, temperature of the respective dishes and whether they were served correctly are all relevant. Finally the form used by the judges assesses the quality, range and service of drinks including alcoholic beverages, soft drinks, water and coffee.

After the judges have scored the restaurant using the relevant criteria a score out of 20 is obtained. This year's results, in terms of overall scoring, are similar to previous years. The winners in most of the various categories scored 15 and above. For example the winner of the Restaurant of the Year, Stillwater River Cafe, scored 17.187 points. This is an exceptional score and rates this restaurant highly in the Australian context. Most of the winners in the other categories together with the runners-up also scored well and most importantly scored consistently across all the judging categories. Unfortunately, there were also some very low scores. These low scores were not necessarily just a result of poor quality or badly presented food but more often a failure in some of the other areas particularly service.

Some of the restaurants which scored badly either entered the wrong category or did not fit the judging process i.e. their restaurants could not really be scored using the RCA prescribed form.

The purpose of this article is to discuss some of the issues that arose during the judging of the awards this year. The comments are offered as general feedback to all restaurants that entered and those that are considering entering the awards next year. They are designed to offer constructive criticism in some cases but also to highlight some of the very good aspects of the judging experience in 2011.

I thought it would be useful to discuss the issues and some of our concerns in the order they appear on the judging form.

The first is pre-table: an important part of the overall dining experience is how guests are treated on arrival at the restaurant and whether good quality service was maintained throughout the meal. In general most of the restaurants scored well in this category. There was usually a pleasant welcome on arrival at the restaurant and judges were usually offered help to a reserved table and at the table e.g. removing coats, presenting menus etc. However this warm and inviting experience didn't necessarily carry over to the remainder of the meal. Quite often the wait person would announce that he or she was "your waiter for the evening" but not be seen again. Often there were several waiters who served at the table e.g. clearing dishes, serving meals and drinks but there was often very little continuity.

The next category is pre-eating which includes table presentation, general items i.e. quality of the decor, suitable lighting etc. and the menu. Judges

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How important do you think it is to be involved with the local community, and how rewarding do you think it is personally?

We sponsor several of the sporting groups in Deloraine it is great to see the clubs use the sponsorship to become successful. Being a small town it is important to be involved in all aspects of the community and we try to help out as much as we can.

What is the key to finding and retaining good staff?

Having a pleasant and safe work environment helps to attract good employees. To choose the right person for the job you need an appropriate interview process and a good induction program.

What would you say is the biggest issue you face running your business.

We rely on our locals, but we also all rely greatly on tourists. Interstate tourism numbers have been down this year and we have had to rely more on locals to support us. It's hard to compete with overseas holidays when the Australian dollar is so good.

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noted that the quality of glassware has significantly improved over the years and is in most cases of a very high quality. It was pleasing to note that the improvement in glassware quality carried over to a lot of the restaurants and cafes who were not offering fine dining. This is to be welcomed.

However the quality of seating in some restaurants remains poor. Often the chairs are uncomfortable and poorly designed. Similarly salt-and-pepper containers were often of commercial quality and very old-fashioned. Salt and pepper grinders were rarely available. The habit in some restaurants of presenting an enormous pepper grinder to the table and enquiring whether the guest would like ground pepper, belongs to the 1970s along with jacket potatoes, sour cream and

chives and is a practice that should cease.

Menus in a lot of instances were old, tired, grubby and in urgent need of replacement and/or refurbishment. Often the presentation of the menu is the first link in the dining experience and to be presented with a menu that is stained, torn and not easy to read or understand is quite off-putting. This can often be attended to quite cheaply. Many of the best restaurants now have menus that change frequently and have adapted to this effect.

One of the most important aspects of judging the menu is whether or not the various dishes are well described. In this respect, while there were some excellent examples, in the main most of the dishes were inadequately described and in some cases quite misleading.

For example one restaurant described a dessert as "poached pear with a blue cheese salad". This dish came dressed with walnuts that had not been described as part of the dish. Many people are allergic to nuts and the fact that walnuts were included in the dish should have been mentioned. The judges believe more attention to detail and really giving some thought to how the dish is described would both enhance the dining experience as well as improve the quality of the menu and the dishes that are ultimately presented.

The next category is overall food evaluation with 12 criteria listed. As mentioned earlier this is the most important category and is given a higher weighting than the criteria in any other

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category. In the great majority of cases the overall quality of the food served and its presentation was of a high standard. This is true of the high-end dining establishments as well as the cafes and bistros that were judged this year. Many of the dishes served to the judges were original and innovative and had a degree of integrity that was welcome. In this category there were a number of factors that led to scores being marked down even though the actual food quality was quite high.



In many cases, including some of the best restaurants, the dishes were not served correctly. This was a major issue for the judges in 2011. It was quite common if 4 people were seated at a table for 2 to be served and for there to be a considerable gap between that service and service to the next couple. It is fundamentally important that all dishes must be served at the same time. If there are four guests at a table they must be served together.

Another aspect noted by the judges this year was that in too many cases food was not served at the correct temperature. It was apparent that some dishes had been prepared ahead of others and even though they were served together tepid and in some cases cold dishes had to be returned. Finally, judges noted that the use of frozen food, particularly fish was more common. If the scallop season in Tasmania is closed in February but they are on a restaurant menu then in 99% of cases they must be frozen. The use of frozen food is unfortunately becoming far too common.

Drinks are the next category evaluated, this includes pre-dinner drinks, service of wine, water and soft drinks, continued drink attention both of water and wine and the quality of tea and coffee and its service. There

were some major sins of omission and commission in this category.

While many establishments have significantly improved their offerings of wine by the glass, particularly Tasmanian wines, the service of wines by the glass remains at best problematical. If wines are served by the glass at table then the bottle should be brought to the table, presented to the diner and then the wine poured for tasting. It is unacceptable to pour the

wine at a bar and then simply deliver the glass or glasses to the diners. On at least four occasions noted by the judges this year when wines were poured at the bar the wrong wine was subsequently delivered to the table. This is an area in need of urgent attention

and even some of the best restaurants in Tasmania are guilty of this practice. It is a simple thing to instruct staff on how wines should be presented to diners and it is up to management to ensure that correct practices are followed.

The judges generally thought that the quality and presentation of most wines has improved over recent years with many of the newer establishments creating innovative and interesting wine lists with a good range of Tasmanian, interstate and imported wines this trend is to be recommended. There are still many wine lists with common commercial labels offering poor choice and poor value. Restaurants with poor wine lists generally had poor service and subsequently did not score well in this category.

One of the important criteria in the drinks category is continued drink attention. In the better restaurants this was done seamlessly. However in many establishments while there was initially good attention to the service of both wine and water often there was little if any drink attention subsequently. This was despite the fact that in many of these establishments there were plenty of waiting staff available.

As I have said, the overall quality of both food and service in most of the high scoring restaurants that entered was of a good standard. However a number of the issues that I have outlined significantly detracted from the dining experience for the judges and led to some lower than expected scores.

I would recommend that if a restaurant is intending to enter the awards next year that they become familiar with the categories offered, this information is available from Sue at the THA (6224 7033 or sue@australianhotels.asn.au) or on the THA website - Awards for Excellence page.

I would also recommend that if you are considering entering the awards next year that you become familiar with the criteria and understand how the judging process works. The feedback you will receive following the judging can be invaluable in assisting you to help improve your service and food standards, or to confirm that you are already doing things right.

There is a general comment I can make to sum up the way the criteria work. A restaurant serving bad food cannot win. The weighting of the food evaluation criteria is simply too high. But a restaurant which has food as its only strength will struggle to win because the judging process rates all other aspects of the dining experience as well. If you missed my previous articles on the judging process and format they are available on the THA website - Awards for Excellence page.

I look forward to continuing as chief judge in 2012 and hope that we get many more entries from members in all categories !

