



A Piece of Cake

HOW ONE GUEST TAUGHT A RESTAURANT TEAM TO GET OVER THEMSELVES

IN EARLY 1989, the newly opened Roy's Restaurant in Honolulu—of which I was a founding partner—landed its first review in the local daily newspaper. Out of four possible “dots,” we garnered one and a half. Almost everything, according to the critic, was wrong. You would think being owned by a celebrated chef was an advantage. She seemed to despise the very idea.

About a week later, a lanky, bespectacled, white-haired man in his mid-70s walked in. We had just opened, so the dining room was empty. The first thing he did was refuse the table he was offered, which was one of our best, located next to a picture window overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Instead, he pointed to a tiny deuce just 10 feet from our exhibition kitchen, where he'd be looking directly at our food runners' butts. Our hostess played it smart—she let him sit where he liked.

He ordered a Martini, which was instantly sent back. A second Martini was also rejected. As I was the manager on duty, it was my job to nip this problem in the bud. I found out his name from the hostesses—Ray Underwood—and introduced myself before asking him what would make him happy. His response: “First, that first Martini was ridiculous, less than half a proper-sized pour; and second, your house gin is terrible!” I asked him what he'd prefer, and he said, “Nothing less than Bombay Sapphire, but I don't expect to be charged extra!”

That kind of demand would typically be a no-go: Every restaurant on earth succeeds, or fails, on how well it controls costs. But I went to the bartender and told him to give Mr. Underwood a triple

pour of Bombay Sapphire. I then instructed the waiter not to charge him an extra dime, even if he ordered ten of them. If he wanted it that bad, he could have it.

Mr. Underwood had three courses during that first visit—at least one of which, as I recall, he sent back. After all, it was easy



PHOTO COURTESY OF RANDY CAPAROSO

From 1988 to 2002, Randy Caparoso (pictured here in 1998) served as founding partner/vice president/corporate wine director of Roy's Restaurants.

to do since he was sitting close enough to the chefs to have direct conversations.

But here's the surprising thing: Every single night for the next ten years, Mr. Underwood would come walking through that door at 5:30 p.m. to sit at the same table and order two Martinis, followed by a glass of wine with three courses. His value as a paying guest grew incalculable. It wasn't that he turned into a kindly old man—he was always cantankerous and demanding, inciting fear among the

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waiters and anxiety among the chefs. We managers, however, could reliably use him as the quintessential example of a guest for staff: If you could satisfy him, you could satisfy anyone. Ray Underwood became our rallying cry. Next to him, all other guests were pussycats.

After 12 years, we became successful enough to open more than two dozen restaurants from Tokyo to New York. We garnered cover stories in national magazines and every accolade there is, from a James Beard Award to placement in the *Nation's Restaurant News*’ “Fine Dining Hall of Fame.” All the while, we served Ray Underwood—even when his health began to fail and he couldn't walk through the doors. Our chefs still prepared his dinners, which were delivered either to his apartment or to his hospital bed, wherever he happened to be.

A permanent place in our restaurant family's history, my history, belongs to Ray Underwood because of what he taught us: how to get over ourselves and how to maintain grace, humility, a thick skin, and common sense. We were never perfect, but we learned how to get better. Because whenever you can meet the toughest challenges, everything else is a piece of cake—just as Ray Underwood taught us. 