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EMPLOYEES

The Must-Have List of Waitstaff Interview Questions to Ask

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Ever enter another restaurant and see their service go off without a hitch? Every waitstaff-to-customer interaction is flawless, and it's simply a seamless transition between front of house and back of house. That well-oiled machine team is shining because their owner hired the best fits from the start. They not only found the proper personalities, but while interviewing servers, they asked the right questions.



"I've interviewed a ton of people in my career, and what I've learned...is that you cannot teach certain things, you have to find them. They've got to come out over the course of an interview," says Rick Camac, dean of restaurant and hospitality management at the Institute of Culinary Education, "If you don't start with the right person, you're surely not going to end with the right person...You've got to figure out over the span of 30 minutes whether this person is a fit, and it's expensive to be wrong."

To help with hiring, here are a few questions for interviewing bartenders and waitstaff that you should ask to find the right fits for your restaurant culture.

What are you passionate about?

It may seem like an overplayed interview question for a wait job, but it can truly show restaurant owners who's being genuine and can meld into your restaurant's ecosystem. If you see them light up about certain parts of the restaurant as they explain their passion, then you've probably got a great hire on your hands.

"We feel like passion goes a long way. If the person seems passionate about the job that they're applying for, we're pretty open to giving them a shot at it," explains Christian Frangiadis, executive chef and partner at Spork. He says they always ask about goals to see if someone is teachable and open to absorbing lessons and culture.

"If you can't tell a good story about yourself, what can you tell a good story about?" says Camac, "I want to know what people are passionate about. What gets you jazzed up in the morning? Why do you want to be in this business? What about this business interests you the most? What don't you like about this business?"

Do you mind if we just chat?

To get a feel for waitstaff on a personal level, have an informal conversation about what they did and didn't like at their previous position, what made them proud, what gave them a spark, and especially for bartenders, what are their favorite drinks, and what would be their dream drink to create?

Camac wants potential hires to talk about themselves in a natural way that shows him what he's looking for: they're hospitable, service-oriented, curious, perceptive, and are team players who'll solve any issues.

"As you're speaking with a potential hire, you get a sense of that person's personality, how articulate is that person, or how meticulous is that person," explains Frangiadis, "What we try to do is have conversations with people about themselves and about their goals. We get a good sense of it, because we are looking for very specific qualities, but you can learn a lot more about people by having just conversations."

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What are the first things you notice when you enter a restaurant?

As the owner, Camac says you need to find curious, perceptive servers who notice things like napkins sitting on the floor, the music being too loud, the air conditioning isn't set to the right temperature, the tables are too close together, or other intangibles that are a natural piece of their personality.

Having that right details down and communicating that in the interview question is key when interviewing servers, and if they're not able to give a succinct answer, they're probably not a great hire for you.

What personality traits would you bring to a team service environment?

Frangiadis says when interviewing servers, he's looking to uncover characteristics that his team needs like fast, organized, affable, articulate, and high energy. If your restaurant, like Spork, is team service, ask how that environment has worked for the potential server in the past and what they brought to that team. Also, ask what they think they can bring to your current team to help it grow.

What incident have you taken from problem to positive?

It's always interesting to hear how a server handled a situation and if they don't have anything to say, that's a bad sign, says Camac. If they're not able to tell you about a time when they were able to solve an issue well, they may not be paying attention, know what to look for in a restaurant, or be able to figure out what signals a well-run restaurant.

Do you have any questions for me?

If in between the interview questions the candidate hasn't been asking questions, that's an issue. Experts say they're looking for servers to ask questions throughout the interview to prove that they're tuned in, curious, and paying attention throughout the process. At the end of the interview, if they ask questions you've already answered or have pre-planned questions that don't completely pertain to the job, consider if they're really that good of a hire for your restaurant.

What if, after the questions and interview process, you still hire the wrong person?

Even if you have a thorough interview process with exceptional questions, sometimes you end up hiring someone who turns out to be not the right personality for your brand.

"Cut your losses as soon as you possibly can. If you're unhappy with the person, it is almost for sure 100 percent that they're unhappy as well, because they can sense it from you," explains Camac, "It becomes a cancerous situation where an unhappy person makes other people unhappy. It hurts morale, and other people see that you're holding onto someone that's clearly a square peg in a round hole and then they lose respect for you."

Address the situation immediately with a short, in-person meeting where you explain how the

server is falling short of expectations and is not the right fit. Then, Camac recommends reviewing your hiring process to see if there's any room for improvement. Make sure that the questions you're asking and the personality you're searching for match your restaurant's culture and brand. "Concentrate on the intangibles, [and] cut your losses as quickly as you can when you figure out [where you went wrong]," he advises.

Waitstaff Interview Questions to Ask

- ✓ What are you passionate about?
- ✓ Do you mind if we just chat?
- ✓ What are the first things you notice when you enter a restaurant?
- ✓ What personality traits would you bring to a team service environment?
- ✓ What incident have you taken from problem to positive?
- ✓ Do you have any questions for me?

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