

Server beware: Patron could be a spy

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SHEENA ALLEN/Daily News

Kravitz dines anonymously to catch servers unawares.

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IT WAS A MONDAY NIGHT at a Center City chain restaurant. The dining room wasn't quite half full, the bar had only a few customers. Just the type of night when wait staff and bartenders typically relax a little bit.

And this was exactly the night restaurant spy Marc Kravitz and I visited this popular, semi-upscale surf-and-turf restaurant for a little test.

The several dozen employees had no idea we were there, and no idea we'd be timing how long they took to make drinks and serve food, and noting how polite they were, whether they knew something about the wine they served, whether they cleared tables in a timely way - even whether they said hello and goodbye to us.

This stealthy exercise is called "quality assurance," but it's not for a dining review or other newspaper write-up. It's an undercover restaurant analysis report paid for by and written up for the restaurant.

Why spy on your own staff?

For dozens of local restaurant owners and managers - from upscale BYOBs to chains, cafes, and even Stephen Starr gems - Kravitz's business, I-Spy, is a "mystery shopping service" that is an owner's critical window into a customer's perspective on service, food and atmosphere.

With up to 60 percent of new restaurants failing in the first year, and thousands, if not millions of dollars being invested in everything from first-time BYOB ventures to

multinational franchises, restaurateurs in today's climate can't afford not to hire a company like Kravitz's to analyze everything from internal blips to major recurring service issues.

Kravitz, whose educational background in the hospitality management field led him to longtime food-writing gigs with *Philly Style* magazine and *City Paper*, opened I-Spy in January 2002 with the idea that he'd use his restaurant knowledge to see things from the guests' perspectives.

His written reports, which cost an average of a few hundred dollars each, help restaurants "maximize their guest experience and return on investment, as well as stay ahead of their competition," according to Kravitz. He now has more than 60 clients and up to 15 secret shoppers working for him. Eateries hire him as often as they want.

"Our report is done through the eyes of guests, who comprise at least 98 percent of their clientele, as compared to the one or two percent of their guests who are 'in the business,'" said Kravitz.

Kravitz isn't alone. With a staggering proliferation of restaurants in Center City in little more than a decade - a 219 percent increase from 1993 to now, or from 65 to 219 restaurants, according to the Center City District - other secret consultants are popping up to help new and established places stay on their toes. The idea for Kravitz and others is not to get employees in trouble or report only problems, but to give a totally well-rounded, objective description of a particular dining experience.

"We're observing things that owners often don't hear about, but should be," said Ken Alan, who runs Secret Site Services, a local boutique mystery-shopper firm that writes up hotels, country clubs, malls and restaurants. "It's a slice of life. We're actually happy when it's a flawless visit. That means they're doing well."

Clients admit they aren't thrilled when they read a detailed report and see that employees are slacking, bartenders are taking their sweet time with drinks, or food is served subpar, but it's how they learn for the next time.

"It captures a part of the business we have trouble seeing," said Rick Sims, general manager of Tria restaurant at 18th and Sansom streets, one of Kravitz's clients. "We can then backtrack and do research. Do we need to add another bartender? Things like that."

I spy . . . trouble

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Let's just say this place never saw him coming.

It was 5 p.m. when he stepped up to the hostess stand for the first test of the evening.

"We are here for a 5:30 reservation," he announced.

The hostess stood idle, making no attempt to make eye contact with Kravitz. Finally, a manager chatting on the phone motioned to her to take care of the guest.

Strike one.

We sat at the bar and ordered a drink. Kravitz was taking mental notes and sharing them with me, including tidbits that had escaped my notice.

Such as the bartender who was intermittently munching from a plate of quesadillas beneath the bar, while serving drinks.

He also nabbed her "rummaging through her pocketbook," failing to ask if we wanted to order food from the bar menu, failing to offer drink refills for more than five minutes after our glasses were empty, and for failing to place napkins beneath the drinks.

Strike two.

We finally headed upstairs for dinner at almost 6 p.m., after reintroducing ourselves to the same hostess, who had no recollection of meeting us or checking us in earlier.

Strike three.

Once we were seated, our server introduced himself, offering that he was "not too shabby for a Monday night" before launching into questions about where we were from and whether we were here for "some flower show or something in town."

I could see Kravitz's mind churning.

For the next hour, I was privy to Kravitz's narration of a host of bumbles. While every diner wouldn't necessarily notice all of these details during a dinner out, collectively, he believes the screw-ups could contribute to customers' overall impression that they wouldn't want to return.

Bread plates stayed on the table until dessert. Entrees took 15 minutes after they were ordered to arrive. After we chugged it, a bottle of water remained empty from the beginning of dinner until we left, with no refill offered. It took almost 15 minutes for the dessert tray to arrive after entrees were cleared - and coffee was still nowhere in sight.

These, and other faux pas, added up to strike four for Kravitz.

When he submitted his six-page report to me the following day, it detailed everything from how clean carpets and windows were to whether the dessert was good, to whether

the server scraped away table crumbs between courses. The grade: 73.9 percent out of 100.

Kravitz called it an "OK" experience, and said that "considering this was a well-established chain restaurant, the overall dining experience was lacking . . ." and he "would not revisit the restaurant . . ."

Now there's a top-secret tidbit I bet this restaurant would probably want to know. *

Visit Kravitz at www.ispy4u.net.