Good Food Should Not Be A Luxury

Excerpted from *The American Way of Eating, Undercover at Walmart, Applebee’s, Farm Fields and the Dinner Table*, Tracie McMillan, (Scribner, 2012).

**The American Way of Eating—Applebee’s**

“Expediting, I am told at orientation, is the hardest job in the restaurant. The primary responsibility of an “expo” is to coordinate the flow of food from line to floor. To paraphrase Bernardo, the frenetic bear of a general manager who runs my orientation session, everything I do keeps the restaurant moving. If I don’t do my job right then the orders won’t look right, and people won’t come back, and servers’ tips will be lower, and the restaurant won’t make as much money, and then they can’t afford to pay an expeditor, which will mean the servers will have to expo their food themselves, which is never a good idea since it tends to result in the orders not looking right ... and the downward spiral into chaos and bankruptcy begins all over again. I am the first domino in line; if I fall, we all go down.”

When I come back the next morning, at 10:00, I don’t start off in the kitchen. Instead, the kitchen manager, Freddie hands me a cup of coffee and a flip book full of presentation diagrams for every item on the menu and tells me to start memorizing: Do hot wings get a ramekin of ranch dressing or bleu cheese? Do they get a big ramekin or a small one? Which sandwiches get a side of coleslaw? Which dishes get sent out with wet naps? Which plates get lemons or limes? Tartar sauce? Cocktail sauce? Honey mustard? Sour cream? Mexi-ranch? There are 151 different dishes on the menu and nearly half require some degree of dressing by the expeditor. I spend several hours hunched over a table in the back of the dining room, my hair pulled up under an Applebee’s cap, scribbling notes to help myself memorize. And then, around noon, as lunch begins, Freddie puts me on the line. ...

“Tony, this is Tracie,” says Freddie. “You’re going to train her on expo, all right?”

“Yessirrr,” says Tony.

He steps up, closer to the counter, and explains the line. The cooks put the food in the window; we dress it. Food moves down the pass from left to right, so ramekins are on the left of the pass, and then there’s the expo line, a series of small refrigerated bins built into the pass, with all the sauces and garnishes tucked in place.

When food comes up you put the correct ramekin of sauce or slaw or whatever it is that goes with it, and send it out. Any questions?

What do you want me to do?
Before he can answer, the printer chortles and spits out a piece of paper. Tony tears it off, looks up at the computer screen and presses a button, making the screen rearrange.

“What did you just do?” I ask.
“What?”
“To the screen?”
“Oh, I bumped the ticket.”
“What do you mean?”
Tony gives me a look equal parts teacher and irritated boss. It’s not on the screen anymore, he says, already pulling plates out of the window and calling for sauces. I scoop them out and hand them to him. A server walks past, sees the plate and barely pauses as he grabs them. The plates go out.

I soon realize that the computer is the nervous system of the restaurant, the circuitry that receives information, routes it through the brain, and enables the body to do something with it all.

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