



I've Got A SECRET

Maybe that quiet guy sitting
alone at the bar isn't who he seems to be.
Then again—maybe he is.

Do you know me? I don't exactly stand out in a crowd, but maybe you've seen me before. Usually I sit at the bar alone, nursing a vodka rocks. Sometimes, though, my partner, Cindi Ishigaki, tags along for a free dinner. I look like a thousand other guys in Los Angeles. And I probably am like them, except for one thing: I'm a spotter.

It's my job to look and act like any other customer in a restaurant and then report back to the owner or manager with all the details. It's not easy. Try learning and remembering the names of everyone you come in contact with during an evening out, as well as the time everything was ordered, the price of every drink you saw poured, and the ingredients evident in each entree. The pay isn't great, either. After spending two hours at a restaurant and whatever

time it takes going and coming, and then maybe two more hours writing a lengthy narrative of the evening, you'll end up making about \$5 an hour. Of course, the expenses for food, drinks, and tips are reimbursed. A free meal, you say? Imagine eating Mexican food nine times in one week. You'll taste tortilla chips in your sleep.

Very few spotters can do it full time. Most, like myself, have other jobs and use the extra money and free meals to supplement a regular income. I'm a freelance investigative reporter, so shopping restaurants fits easily into my schedule and keeps me fed when the checks are slow coming in.

Contrary to what you've heard buzzing around the kitchen, we're not hired just to nit-pick and rat on servers. The folks who hire us want to know *anything* about the restaurant, the service, or the food that might turn a customer

off—or *on*. And they're interested in two other areas: server honesty and improved sales. If a spotter's report can identify problems a manager can't see, then, theoretically at least, business will improve—and everyone will benefit, including servers.

There's no denying it, though: spotters do make mistakes. We can't observe everything. We sometimes misinterpret things we see. And we usually have to judge the performance of a server only at the moment we're in contact. The customers before or after might see the server completely differently. It's not always fair.

Oftentimes, too, we're called in to solve a problem that could have been solved without us. There's a classic story about the owner of a bar who watched his profits decline week after week while he was spending the same amount of money on liquor. It was ob-

Article By DON RAY ■ Illustration By LOU BROOKS

