



# 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.**

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**D**o 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-

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Article By DON RAY ■ Illustration By LOU BROOKS



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vious that someone on his night crew was stealing, so he hired a shopping service to find out how.

Everything looked fine to the spotters, though. The problem, they decided, had to be elsewhere. The owner didn't agree; he paid for another week of shopping and got the same good reports. When he insisted that the spotters return for yet another week, the owner of the shopping service refused. He told the bar's owner that nothing indicated the two night bartenders were doing anything wrong. They were pouring properly, handling the cash properly, and ringing up sales on their own registers. "But," the bar owner stammered, "I only have *one* register."

It took a team of eight of us to solve a shortage problem at another cocktail lounge. Upper management noticed that revenues were dropping by several hundred dollars a day and sent us in. Again, every transaction was properly rung up and receipts were issued with each drink. But after a couple of days the problem became clear to us. A night manager was closing out one of the four registers whenever business waned slightly. He'd remove the lounge's copy of the register tape and insert a fresh tape. A while later, when business picked up a bit, he'd put on an apron and help out his three bartenders. They loved it because he'd give them all the tips. They didn't realize that he was ringing up all the sales on the "closed" register. At the end of the night, he'd throw away the second tape and pocket all the sales he rang up on it.

**I**n teams of two we watched his actions all evening. When we were sure of what he was doing, we took turns buying drinks and collecting the bogus receipts. We were all sitting at the bar when our team leader gave the sign to the company's security people and the local police. As they handcuffed the man and took him away, eight of the 10 customers at the bar—all spotters—feigned surprise. One by one, we departed in different directions.

I'm not the best at catching bartenders who are stealing; I don't even drink. If I'm with a partner who does, it's okay to buy a Coke, orange juice, or a Virgin Mary. No one bats an eye at someone who is at a bar with a friend and doesn't drink. But when I work a place alone, it's a different story. When there's no other reason to be in a bar than to drink, a nondrinker can only be one thing—a spotter.

To solve the problem, I devised a lit-

tle trick a few years ago that makes it look as if I'm drinking the vodka rocks I order, when I'm really drinking only the tall ice water I request with it. It isn't foolproof, so I sometimes eliminate a good portion of vodka by taking in as large a mouthful as I can without being obvious and then going to the men's room to spit it out. That doesn't always work, though. Once, as I was on my way to the restroom a man asked me the time; I could only shrug and mumble, "I don't know." He looked at me and my wristwatch, shook his head, and walked away.

It's no surprise to anyone that bartenders have been known to give drinks away to customers in hopes of getting bigger tips. Some purposely drop coins from customers' change into the ice bin and hope no one notices. At the end of the night, they can fish out quite a nice haul of unclaimed change.

**T**hose kinds of things are easy to spot. The hardest thing to uncover is a cocktail waitress who's working either in cahoots with a bartender or on her own to make a few extra bucks. I saw one cocktail waitress who would keep the receipts from a party of six in the amount of, say, \$12 and then quote that price to a party of four or five when she served them a round. If the customers questioned the price (which they almost never did), she presented them with a \$12 receipt. Either way, she made \$4 to \$6 per round. It added up.

Then there was the cocktail waitress who never placed her wine orders with the bartender. Instead she'd stroll across the restaurant to the dining room and fill wine glasses from the cask used by the dinner waitresses. Since the customers didn't ask for receipts, she could pocket all the money. To find out what she was doing, I had to get up from the bar each time she left the cocktail lounge and watch her go to the other room. To the people around me, I must have looked pretty silly. Sometimes I'd go toward the phone or to the restroom. Occasionally I'd walk over to the receptionist to ask if there were any calls for me. Finally I was able to take in all aspects of her operation.

For every person I've caught stealing, though (and that's only a handful), there have been hundreds who were honest. Usually the worst thing I'd learn about a server was that he or she was perhaps not in tune with the way things should be operating. The funniest incident I remember involved a



waitress at a Mexican restaurant near Los Angeles who greeted her dinner customers exactly as scripted by management, but in the most American of accents and literally at the top of her lungs.

"BUENAS TARDES! GOOD EVENING! CAN I GET YOU A MARGARITA?!" People seated three booths away would jump when she shouted. It went on like that all night. When a party of five sat at the booth next to us, we got a real show. Again she said, "BUENAS TARDES! GOOD EVENING! CAN I GET YOU A MARGARITA?!" When no one responded, she repeated the phrase to each member of the group. Still no response. Finally she looked one older woman in the eye and, almost nose-to-nose, said, "WHATZAMATTER? CAT GOT YOUR TONGUE?!" The little woman quietly replied, "No hablo inglés." The waitress then matter-of-factly turned to a busboy of Mexican descent and shouted, "PANCHO! YOU'LL HAVE TO TALK TO THESE PEOPLE. THEY CAN'T EVEN SPEAK ENGLISH!"

There are times when I'll overlook mistakes made by a waitress or waiter if the overall service is good. Sometimes servers will break a little rule in order to make my meal more enjoyable. Sure, I could write them up. It *does* cost the company a few cents for the free refill, extra salad, or whatever. But I figure generosity of that sort can also ensure that a customer will come back and spend much more at a later date. The servers' secrets are safe with me.

Sometimes I've even overlooked spills, breakage, or unserved items if the excuses were clever enough. One waitress carelessly spilled an entire glass of scotch and water on me as she leaned over to serve it to my partner. She quickly placed the glass back on the tray and immediately said, "Damn! That glass has a hole in it! I'm sorry." I asked her to show me the hole, but she had a sudden attack of deafness and quickly walked away. I scored her a 9.5 on originality and forgot the whole incident.

Servers aren't my only targets. Sometimes I'm sent in to check on management. Recently I had a chance to give top management some information they didn't expect. It was a Mexican restaurant near Los Angeles. The waitress was giving wonderful service, and the food was great. The only com-

plaint I could have made was that there was a blowhard in his late thirties sitting with two beautiful ski instructors at the next table. He was bragging at full volume about his drinking ability, and there wasn't much a server could do about that. I watched with interest when two members of the restaurant's management team walked up to the table. I wondered how they were planning to quiet the man.

They didn't. Instead they asked if they could get him anything else. Naturally I assumed he was a VIP. After the managers left, though, the guy started boasting about how he had consumed more than \$60 worth of liquor the other night at "one of my other stores." The more he talked, the more it became clear: he was a regional manager who was wining and dining his friends, practically snapping his fingers for the best of service, and bragging about all the freebies he regularly gets. It was nice to know that one of my "special" reports made it all the way to the presi-

dent of the company.

A spotter almost always suspects he or she has been identified. Every time a bartender looks at you, you're sure he knows. Then maybe he'll give away a drink or use profanity—something that's strictly forbidden—and you'll breathe a sigh of relief.

Sometimes they do know. One bartender I'm sure figured out I was a spotter. It was one of those dreaded assignments: my partner Cindi and I entered a cocktail lounge to find we were the only two customers, and we couldn't avoid chatting with the friendly bartender. I figured that if I was outgoing enough he'd never think I was a spotter. I told him about the first time I visited Casa Bonita, a famous Denver restaurant that had more sideshows than Ringling Bros. We laughed together as I described the awe I experienced there as

## SPOTTER DO'S AND DON'TS

One of the most secure feelings a spotter can have is when a server points to another customer and whispers, "Psst! See that guy with the crossword puzzle? He's a spotter." More often than not, the server is wrong. How do you spot a spotter? Here are some guidelines.

### A spotter will


- try to determine your name.
- look around a lot.
- nurse a drink for a long time.
- chat with the bartender.
- sometimes talk into a hidden tape recorder.
- order appetizers.
- send food back if it's not cooked properly.
- sometimes not eat very much of the food.
- call on the manager if it's appropriate.
- check the restrooms.
- come back to the same restaurant more than once.
- take receipts.

### A spotter won't

- ever write anything down while he or she can be seen.
- pay for drinks with a credit card.
- get terribly drunk.
- make unreasonable requests.
- understand what you mean if you use the term *spotter*.
- usually order the same entree as a fellow shopper.
- always order the most expensive dish.
- be rude, loud, or demanding.
- usually dine in large parties.
- tell the manager he or she is a spotter.
- ask for separate checks.
- ever admit that he or she is a spotter.

—D. R.





**W**hile the mariachi band was playing “Cucurrucucu Paloma,” my partner Cindi leaned over to whisper something in my ear. “I think they’re on to us,” she said.

cliff divers splashed beside my table and kids raced by to play in the arcade, climb into gazebos, or visit the gift shop. The report I later wrote mentioned nothing of the conversation, but somehow the bartender put two and two together and made it a point to remember us.

Almost two years later, we returned to the same restaurant. When we sat down at the bar, he placed napkins in front of us and said, “How ya doing? You been to that restaurant in Denver lately?” Within moments, the manager appeared at the bar and introduced himself to us. He personally took us to our dinner table when it was time and sent the talented mariachi band to play a few songs for us. During “Cucurrucucu Paloma,” Cindi leaned over to whisper something in my ear. “I think they’re on to us,” she said.

**T**he problem of being the only customer hit me even harder when I worked a restaurant in Phoenix several years ago. I was to shop the cocktail lounge four times a month—more than on any other such assignment. I was there so much, in fact, that the bartender got to know me personally. We were both from the same town in Southern California and had even frequented some of the same places. The problem was, often I was one of the only customers there and he wouldn’t charge me for my drinks. If I wrote him up for serving free drinks, he would’ve known that I was the shopper. Who knows? Maybe I was the only person he was giving freebies to. It killed me to have to ignore the one thing I was sent in to discover. I felt as if I were contributing to his crimes. Finally I did something to which spotters often have to resort. I made it look as if someone else had written the report. It was an early afternoon when I got there, and I was glad to see that there were four men sitting at the bar, drinking heavily. The more they drank, the louder and crazier they got. The stories they told made it clear to everyone that they were doctors. There was just one other couple sitting at the bar, and they were middle-aged and very quiet.

I sat down next to the doctors and started carrying on with them. We told jokes. We sang songs. We were loud. The bartender, as usual, gave me a free drink. When he got his first bad report, there was no doubt in his mind that the quiet couple were spotters. The damning entry read: “There were five doctors sitting at the bar, obviously in-

toxicated, shouting, singing, and carrying on.” It indicated the bartender should have stopped serving.

The next time I was in, the bartender said to me, “I got shopped the last time you were in here. The spotters were pretty dumb, too. Can you believe they thought you were a doctor?”

**I**ve been a spotter for 12 years, and to tell the truth, I don’t feel any guilt. Sure, it’s a little underhanded, but it’s also effective. As far as I know, there’s no better way to make sure a restaurant’s food and service are what they’re expected to be.

I’d like to think, though, that management reads the reports I submit in the spirit in which they’re written. Most do. I know of several managers who always pass along positive feedback with any criticism. But occasionally it doesn’t work out that way. A few weeks ago, I talked to a waitress who had been shopped by another spotter. His report was one of the most flattering I’ve ever read. He said the service was unsurpassed and the food was fantastic. He even mentioned that he would recommend the restaurant to friends, based on the quality of the food and service.

But none of that ever got back to the waitress. It seems the spotter also mentioned that the waitress had failed to tell him what the specials of the day were and hadn’t offered wine with dinner. For him, those were minor infractions. But for upper-level management, those were the only things that mattered. The waitress was called on the carpet and told that any future violations would result in her termination.

When I read the report to the waitress, she looked shocked. She pointed out that it was a weekend night when she was shopped and that she was very busy. “I’m a good waitress,” she told me. “My customers come back again and again.”

That sort of thing shouldn’t happen. If servers do their jobs and are honest, if management looks for more than just the negative in shopping reports, and if spotters are professional and fair-minded, then everyone comes out ahead.

As for me, I’d be happy to be a spotter for another 20 years—that is, if I didn’t ever have to eat another tortilla chip. ■

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