

Club Director

SUMMER 2025

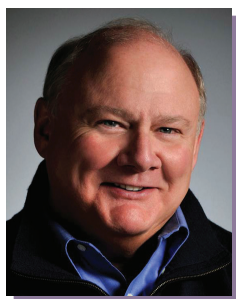
NATIONAL CLUB ASSOCIATION

A portrait of Michael McCarthy, a middle-aged man with short dark hair, smiling. He is wearing a dark blue suit jacket, a white shirt, and a light blue tie with a red and dark blue geometric pattern. The background is a blurred outdoor scene with green foliage and a body of water.

Meet
Michael
McCarthy

NCA's New Chair

Bring Hospitality Back to the Dining Experience, and Members will Come in Drove



DAN DENEHY

In the not-so-distant past, Oscar of the Waldorf was a name revered worldwide in the hospitality industry. Oscar was the celebrity Maitre d'hôtel of Delmonico's Restaurant and later the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City, 1893-1943. Oscar was a bit of a showman, with extraordinary service skills, warmth, and an excellent memory for his guests' names and their personal preferences. He was a celebrity restaurant host well before celebrity chefs became the main attraction at high-end restaurants.

Another such notable maitre d' was Peter Langan, of London's historic Langan's Brasserie. It is said that Peter was a larger-than-life character who made

his restaurant like a stage, with each guest playing a part. Perhaps it was his business partner, the actor Michael Caine, who influenced his style. The restaurant continues to bear Langan's name and thrive even after his death more than 30 years ago. A more recent industry icon is Jean-Claude Breton, who led the service at Restaurant Gordon Ramsay with great warmth and personal connection for 24 years until 2022. While Ramsay may not be known as the most warm and engaging restaurateur, he certainly understands who to put out front—a lesson for all of us! The theme in each of these iconic cultures is foremost how each of these masters made their guests feel, even beyond what made it to the plate.

“Why not hire an unbelievable master of ceremonies that makes every member and guest feel special and welcome? Think big!”

One of the great stories and lessons in why hospitality is the key to a restaurant's success is the story of Will Guidara, who recently wrote “Unreasonable Hospitality” and was the front of the house manager and co-owner force behind Eleven Madison Park (EMP) in NYC, which rose to become the number one restaurant in the world. EMP was a spin-off of Danny Myers' famous Union Square Hospitality Group, a restaurant company with numerous varied New York Times three-star restaurants in NYC, and most widely known for its Shake Shack dynasty.

Under Guidara's tutelage, EMP rose from a grand brasserie in Manhattan to the No. 1 restaurant in the world in 2017. They earned all the stars imaginable along the way to number one, thanks to their beautiful dining room and outstanding culinary and beverage program. But what set them above the rest was their focus on hospitality. Guidara chose to take the route of unpretentious yet immensely engaging in the fine dining arena because he firmly believed that the dining experience was as essential as the restaurant's culinary offerings and other amenities. He believes, as do I that patrons pay for the ambiance, food and wine, but it is the service and hospitality that set a great restaurant, hotel and club apart and make it a preferred destination. Have we in the club world lost that focus on hospitality in our dining rooms, and if so, can we get it back? Ironically, club members pay significant dues for access, and yet many clubs certainly way underdeliver on what we're talking about—how we make the member and guest feel.

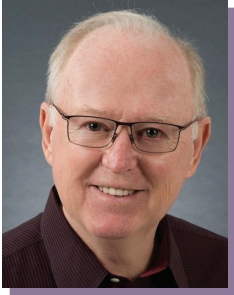
In his March 2025 article, Simon Harris, a luxury hospitality consultant, wrote:

Reviving the role of maitre d' isn't about nostalgia; it's about ensuring that the restaurant is a place of warmth, connection, and genuine Hospitality. Dining out has become more expensive than ever. People aren't going to movies or the theatre as much anymore; dinner is the show, and the best dinners are not just eaten; they are felt. A great Maitre would create those intangible moments that linger in a guest's memory, a sense of being thoroughly looked after. These are the moments that turn first-time diners into lifelong supporters.

In recent years, many clubs have invested heavily in redesigning their dining rooms and employing the best executive chef and culinary team they can attract. According to a 2023 survey by the Club Management Association of America, the median compensation for a chef was \$145,000, and for the food and beverage manager, it was \$110,000. Chefs earn approximately 30% more than the F&B Manager. Suppose the front of the house is where hospitality is focused. Why would we not expect to pay what it takes to attract and retain,

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The Real Star of the Hospitality Show is the Dining Room Manager



BOB JAMES

As we all know, “Where Everybody Knows Your Name” was the theme song for the wildly successful “Cheers” television sitcom that ran for 11 years until 1993. Viewers quickly learned, however, that the tagline meant much more than simply knowing their patron’s names and that “Cheers” was a metaphor for the hospitality the regulars received, the comforting and inclusive nature of the staff, and the engaging and entertaining nature of Sam Malone (aka Ted Danson) the head bartender/owner.

The “Cheers” bar was certainly understated; the beverage and food offerings were pub-style, and the service was rough, unsophisticated, and often rude. However, the atmosphere was highly engaging and hospitable. It was a place where TV viewers lived vicariously through the antics of the cast.

Nowadays, the truly hospitable dining venues are often small, mom-and-pop operations that remain successful over time because mom and/or pop are at the door and run the floor. Unfortunately, only the very elite clubs and expensive restaurants can afford to employ a highly skilled and truly engaging front house maître d’ (or as we now more commonly refer to such a person, the dining room or food and beverage manager) who has the mentality of an owner. That is if you can find one at all, much less keep them. Competition is excellent for such unique individuals, and they quickly get lured away by the competition or leave, seeking promotions or ownership interests. Fortunately, most clubs do not need one of these unique characters and probably would not tolerate their huge egos anyway.

However, we do need an engaging leader for our service team, a person who exudes hospitality, is a good trainer, and puts the members first. With the help of our point-of-sale systems and other specialty software, we can provide a crutch for dining room managers who possess the necessary “HQ.” Still, we may not excel in remembering members’ food and beverage preferences, special occasions, family information, seating preferences, or other interesting and informative information about the member that can make their dining experience more memorable and the club’s preferred destination.

The iconic maître d’s that Dan mentioned are few and far between, but there are plenty of dining room managers who possess the personality and requisite service skills. They do exist and oftentimes can be groomed from within. It is not sufficient to expect the general manager or assistant general manager to fill this role while conducting their routine walk-throughs of the dining room during meal periods. They have too many other responsibilities that keep them from spending the necessary time to

actively manage the dining room consistently. Yes, the members like to see upper management show interest and share a brief salutation, but genuine hospitality must be nurtured and embodied in the entire service team. Creating and maintaining that culture is not a part-time job. The dining room manager is the ringmaster with a big smile and a warm personality who trains his team, sets the stage for what members should expect, and then orchestrates the flow and tempo of service from start to finish with precision and engaging attentiveness.

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Restaurants and clubs that resort to placing pleasant but inexperienced faces at the hostess or maître’s stand (it’s ironic that we still use the latter term) are missing the boat. Hospitality begins at the door, and the first contact should be with more than just someone whose eyes are glued to the reservation sheet or seating chart and barely acknowledge the member/guests’ arrival. These “seaters,” as I call them, are often oblivious to what is going on in the dining room and do not come close to substituting for a dining room manager. They may be a necessary evil for busy periods, but their number one mission should be to be engaging. If it is not in their DNA, move them along, as you cannot train that into them. The dining room manager must be present throughout the service period, hovering over the door, and watch the floor like a hawk. Does your dining room manager show this kind of ownership,

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or even create, our own “homegrown celebrity” dining room manager and truly fulfill the role of master of ceremonies?

Bob, I know you will be presenting an alternative view on this, which I trust will not suggest that the CEOs, COO and general managers (whatever their titles may be) have the time, refined skills, or even the personalities to fill the role of dining room manager at the level that I am suggesting. However, their roles and responsibilities at an average club with approximately \$13 million in gross revenue should not be so

encumbering that they do not have the time to support the dining room leadership actively. I’m not arguing that their roles should be recast to be modeled after Peter Langan. But suppose the role of dining room manager/maître d’ has evolved to reflect the current complexities of our industry. Why not hire an unbelievable master of ceremonies that makes every member and guest feel special and welcome? Think big! 

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◀ *Point/Counterpoint by Bob James continued from page 61*

have a servant’s heart, and embrace this role as their primary responsibility? They do exist and in greater quantity than the traditional maître d’, but the good ones command a respectable salary and respect as a key partner in the club’s food and beverage program. Create a culture of hospitality in your dining rooms, and you will no doubt see your seats filled on nights other than just the weekends. 

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