

Beat: Miscellaneous

Tipping, and the plight of servers

Where does my 10% service charge go?

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USPA NEWS - Do you pay tips or service charge when you visit a restaurant? Find out where that money goes and if the servers get their fair share for their work. I've asked former restaurant managers and waitresses for their take on the subject.

The city provides a plethora of dining options including canteens, takeaways, diners, cafés, restaurants, bars, and of course, street food. While the more economical options may be self-served, eating out usually involved being served by a waiter or a waitress. Last Sunday, I visited a Thai restaurant that boasted “free service charge” with my family, which got me thinking: how do servers earn their income?

Waiters and waitresses are in an underappreciated profession. In the US and Canada, it is common practice for customers to pay a 10% tip to their servers, as it is their main source of income. Servers in North America usually expect an hourly base rate of US\$2-5 per hour, well below their minimum wage. While there is no tradition of tipping here in large Asian cities, it isn't uncommon to see a 10% compulsory service charge listed at the bottom of the menu and slapped on the final bill.

While servers' wages aren't set at an unreasonably low level in Hong Kong, tipping hasn't really become a cultural custom. The “Cha Chaan Tengs” (somewhat equivalent to a diner in the US) have labor costs included in the menu price so they don't pad the bill with a 10% service charge or expect any tips. The usual wage for servers in these types of eateries range from anywhere between US\$4-8 per hour, which is above the local minimum wage. Even a cashier at McDonalds can get up to \$7 per hour working part-time.

Though servers may be paid a fair wage in local mom and pop restaurants, the story is very different in higher-end establishments. In order to cater to expatriate customers, restaurants and bars in the business districts sometimes hire Filipinas, Indonesians, Indians or Nepalese to serve their English-speaking patrons in their native language. While those restaurants do require a 10% service charge be paid, those fees don't always get their way into the pockets of the servers.

Mr. “Wong”, who doesn't wish to be identified to protect his job, used to be a manager at a restaurant in the city a few years ago. Their restaurant hired Nepalese servers for a monthly wage of US\$1100 a month (half the median income) and charge a 10% service charge. However, when asked about how that charge is used to supplement the servers' wages, he says, “the staff don't see a cent of the service charge” [the restaurant] took a cut of the staff tips for administration” and pay their staff very low wages for very long hours. Though this practice is not uncommon in Hong Kong there are still some “decent operators out there who actually pass on the service charge to their staff”, he recalls.

“Janet”, who was a waitress in Singapore, worked for one of those decent operators and got her fair share of the 10% service charge. However, it “may not be practiced everywhere, and [I] suspect [a] majority of food and beverage places do not pay this to the employees”, she says about usual restaurant practices in Singapore. She is in support of tipping only when the service is excellent and not when a service charge is applied because it gives servers an incentive and reward to improve customer service.

Elouise Mccracken from Leeds, a girl I went to school with, was a restaurant server for some time after we graduated. She worked for restaurants in the UK and one not far from where my alma mater is in Hong Kong, she recalls the long hours and tough conditions that she has had to work in. “The heat and black clothing made me quite dizzy and I was very tired and drained while working.” She reminds me that this was when she was still in subtropical Asia.

When asked about the type of hours and benefits the employees enjoyed she had this to say about her 13-hour shifts: “Where I worked, overtime rates didn't exist and we would have maximum half-hour breaks that never really happened, twenty minutes was a standard” you get a meal while working every five hours so if you work thirteen hours you get two breaks” but when you are busy you don't have time to eat. So even though they say yes to eating, I was regularly made to wait hours until I could eat just because of lack of staff.

Working long hours in physically challenging conditions are tough, but Elouise also understands that ends have to be met in the high-

rent environment of the city. “Small businesses don’t follow all of the laws” we know [the conditions are] unfair on us but it’s unfair on the business too, like they have to pay so much for rent.” She also highlights that even though the restaurants pay their wages, the customers play an equally important role in making their lives easier. “I believe a lot of people who go to a restaurant feel like they are on a higher level than the servers and they start to look down on us as if we are their servants. We are workers just as everyone who works.”

How can you make a difference? In terms of tipping, Mr. Wong suggests that you can either pay a tip on top of the 10% service charge that the restaurants require and Janet suggests tipping the server directly. Elousie says that a simple smile, a little respect, and basic manners can go a long way. As for me, I don’t earn nearly enough as a writer to eat out at restaurants with servers, so I’m sticking to canteens and takeaway counters at supermarkets.

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