

Russell Blaikie

The owner of Must Winebar in Perth and Muster Bar and Grill in Margaret River shares the importance of connecting with customers and staff

There was never any question—it was as though I never had to make a decision about my career. Growing up on a dairy and sheep property in Cowaramup, Western Australia, I was surrounded by wonderful seasonal produce and a family who loved food, so it was natural for me to become a chef. I remember when I was 13 years old, I'd get on my bike and ride down to the local restaurant, where I would do service way past midnight, and ride back home. I just really loved it.

I'm a great believer in your work experience always adding to your capability as a professional. Sometimes you don't realise it, particularly at the time you're doing it. For instance, my first job as an apprentice at the Sheraton Perth Hotel—where I was rolling out 1000 crumbed potato balls—wasn't that enjoyable at the time, but I got experience in quantity cooking, volume and large scale. Even though I find myself in a smaller scale operation now, owning two businesses, there are times I fall back on that large-scale experience and the lessons I learnt as a young apprentice.

Producing great food in an environment where you feel rewarded is one of the greatest skills I learnt from Anton Mosimann, the head chef at the Dorchester in London. He wasn't old school; he was in fact the antithesis of the old school chef—he wasn't a screamer, he didn't yell, he didn't jump up and down. He was a great delegator and could articulate what he wanted for his cuisine. And that's why his food was so good. He got people who wanted to work for him and that, I think, set Mosimann aside from his peers at the time.

The best part of my day is any positive interaction I can have with one of my staff members or one of my customers. In the hospitality business, everyone wants to know who the boss is and they want to have something to do with him, to shake his hand and to have that connection.

I want my customers to walk away from their experience at Must feeling they've had an interaction they feel good about, and have eaten a type of food they love. I want to know they can walk out and fly the flag for my business.

I love communicating with my staff in order to make their day better, and that's a skill. When they walk away from a meeting—whether the comments offer praise or constructive criticism—it's important that they walk away feeling empowered to do their job better. Being able to encourage staff to deliver that tiny little extra effort over and above the call of duty, and to make a customer's experience positive, is something that is really rewarding.

Hospitality is a really tough business. I believe the only way you can be successful in hospitality is to set your message, work out who you are and what you are, then consistently act and set the behaviour of the business around achieving that goal. That means by repeating yourself and you've got to be persistent,

you can't get exhausted from repeating yourself. In hospitality we're only as good as the worst service we've provided or the worst meal we've provided—that's our measure. The customer who comes in and gets that level of service or that level of meal, that is their reality, good or bad.

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As hospitality operators, sometimes we forget to stay positive. We all get caught up in running a business and paying the bills and looking at our computers and the fact is, we are a business that is more customer and staff focused than anything else I know. Investing time in meeting a customer, or chatting to a group of people who've come in for dinner, or spending five minutes with a staff member about a positive issue or even a negative issue—that is an investment that I think has a high return. ●

