



The Last Maître D'

What happened to this Philadelphia fine-dining fixture?

On a summery evening at Water Works Restaurant, the heavy heat and humidity brought by an approaching storm combined with broken air-conditioning made the scenic restaurant's dining room almost unbearable. It's times like these that André Darwish, the 67-year-old, bright-eyed Parisian maître d', does his best work. Actually, it's his sole job here, to care, with no limits, for his customers. And that night, his customers were sweating their way through dinner. There was the young couple whose special occasion Darwish saved with a quick switch to a cooler table, a re-iced bottle of white and humble apologies. And there was a less tolerant man, one whose night, Darwish knew, couldn't be

saved by a free dessert, so the maître d' actually suggested he leave before his table was ready. "Hopefully, he will come back, rather than remember suffering uncomfortably through a miserable meal," Darwish explained.

Darwish's people-sense is part practiced skill—he spent 13 years commanding the dining room at Le Bec-Fin—part intuition, and complete commitment to his clientele. "André Darwish?" says Le Bec-Fin's Georges Perrier. "He is certainly one of the best in the city, maybe even the country."

He may be one of the best, and he may be one of the last. The classic role of maître d' is dying. And it's not until you meet Darwish—and if you dine at Water Works, you will meet him—that you real-

ize he's what's missing from Philadelphia's high-end dining scene.

Waitstaff working the floor at restaurants today are rarely satisfied with a business card boasting "Maître D'." They all have a 10-year plan—manager, food and beverage director, sommelier, maybe even owner—resulting in a high turnover rate and a different focus. "A lot of our younger recruits think their office is a small, windowless room in front of a computer," says Kyrsta Scully, food and beverage director at Four Seasons Hotel. "They don't realize they have large, beautiful offices with window views: the floor of the dining room."

At the same time, restaurants, as intent as any business on cutting costs,

have a hard time justifying an employee whose only job is to make small talk. So maître d's have merged with managers, who are bogged down with server schedules, linen orders and butter knives. From there, suggests Scully, "Maybe the maître d' leaves, and the restaurant seems to survive. They think they can make it without replacing him."

After all, who needs a maître d' in the age of the celebrity chef? "The explosion of celebrity chefs means that people want to see them," says Daniel Stern, chef/owner/personality behind Rae and Gayle. "It's great for us and the guest, but it's not a replacement for having a person dedicated to service."

Which is where Darwish comes in. He's managed to merge the traditional maître d' role into something that works in the increasingly casual but still high-priced restaurants that now define Philadelphia's food scene.

On the night of the AC snafu, Darwish removed his jacket. He apologized for the informality, but he didn't need to. This job is no longer jackets-only. As Darwish says, "It's not about casual dining or fine dining. It's about the guest."

—Ashley Primis

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