

# Passion and sincerity the key to service excellence

Two service staff show how dedication to their profession helped them move up the corporate ladder. **By Timothy Loh and April Chye**

**I**F ANYONE ever has to dispel the myth that service professionals have very few opportunities to move up the corporate ladder, they only have to look to Irwin Tan and Carolina Lee.

Mr Tan is a restaurant manager at Bistro Du Vin, while Ms Lee is The Scarlet's front-office manager. Both of them have successfully made a mark with their dedication to service excellence.

The two joined the service industry at an entry level.

Mr Tan joined the Les Amis Group (which manages Bistro Du Vin) as a commis sommelier in October 2008 and was promoted earlier this year to restaurant manager at Bistro Du Vin's second outlet at Zion Road to lead its service team.

"Service excellence is ... always trying to meet and, if possible, exceed your guests' expectations," he said. This includes "little things like observing their body language" to gauge their preferences and aversions.

Ms Lee agreed, adding: "Ser-

vice has to come from the heart. You have to love people and the job in order to be in the industry because we're not as well paid as in the banks or other professions."

The front-office manager, who joined The Scarlet as duty manager in November 2007 and was promoted last year, recalled an incident when a couple stayed at the hotel three years ago. The wife suddenly came down with stomach flu and had to be hospitalised, causing an unexpected extension of their stay in Singapore. To minimise the couple's discomfort, The Scarlet gave them a special room rate, helped re-arrange their flights and checked on the wife in the hospital.

For both service professionals, the motivation for excellent service comes in the form of positive feedback from customers.

"It feels good when guests write a letter to your company to say they enjoyed your services during their stay. Through these compliments, the company can see that I have passion in my job and continues to believe that I can do a good job," remarked Ms Lee.

## Complaints

Said Mr Tan: "It's about people leaving the restaurant happy, coming back not just for the food but also for the service we provide which makes the whole dining experience enjoyable and memorable."

Ensuring service excellence is "definitely important to drum up your business", Ms Lee believes, because of the power of "word-of-mouth" as a marketing tool.

"When guests are happy, they tell or bring their friends. Sometimes people talk about (Bistro Du Vin) online, on sites like Trip-Advisor," which creates return business for the restaurant, Mr Tan said.

On the flipside, when complaints are sent in, Ms Lee said, The Scarlet cannot agree with every complaint made straightaway, and advocates a case-by-case approach when dealing with feedback from guests.

Internally, both organisations have put measures in place to ensure high service standards



YEN MENG JIN

## MAKING THEIR MARK

The Scarlet hotel's Ms Lee and Bistro Du Vin's Mr Tan say their motivation comes from customers' positive feedback

among all their staff. Mr Tan describes the training programme at Les Amis as "very intensive".

"There's a lot of discipline inculcated in the whole culture," he said. Product knowledge is very important, and service personnel are expected to be familiar with the food they're serving, from the source of the ingredients to how they are cooked.

The organisation recently set up a training department so that standard operating procedures can be made clearer.

At The Scarlet, there is a quarterly rewards-based programme for staff. Ms Lee, who manages the front desk, buys gifts for the staff member who has received the most number of compliments to encourage him or her to continue providing good service.

The government, too, is working on raising service quality in Singapore, and began the "Go the Extra Mile for Service (GEMS Up)" initiative two years ago.

GEMS Up, which "seeks to raise service quality and customer satisfaction to the next level", is driven collectively by the five GEMS Up partners: the Institute of Service Excellence at SMU (ISES), National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), Singapore Tourism Board (STB), Workforce De-

velopment Authority (WDA) and Spring Singapore.

In fact, the WDA recently launched a Singapore Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) Diploma in Food and Beverage Services, which includes an apprenticeship that allows students to learn from industry experts at certain establishments, one of which is Les Amis.

For Mr Tan and Ms Lee, this is a step in the right direction to bring service standards in Singapore to a world-class level.

Aside from improving the skill-sets of personnel in the industry, both service professionals believe that there is a need to educate the general public and change their attitudes towards the service industry.

## Perception

From Mr Tan's experience, many Singaporeans have a perception that people in the service industry do not hold proper educational qualifications, which is why they enter this industry.

"People tend to think service personnel are somehow below them and they don't see it as a profession," Ms Lee said.

But as the duo have shown, passion and sincerity in service delivery, plus training, can go a long way.