

egullet.com presents

The Daily Gullet

READ @ CHEW @ DISCUSS

TDG Home | eG Forums | RecipeGullet | ImageGullet | eGCI | JobGullet | eGullet Store

Empty Glasses; Empty Pockets

Restaurant staff burned by Rocco's paycheck fiasco

Patricia Gay

Tuesday, August 26, 2003

FOR TAD Carducci, former assistant cellar master at Windows on the World, the chance to work with Rocco DiSpirito on the NBC reality show *The Restaurant* seemed like a dream job. He had long admired Rocco's reputation as a creative chef and was an ardent fan of *Melting Pot*, DiSpirito's show on the Food Network. As an aspiring actor, Carducci also thought exposure from *The Restaurant* would be a windfall for his career. Enthusiastic about working as a member of Rocco's barstaff, little did Carducci realize that his windfall would turn into a monsoon, forcing Carducci to abruptly quit the restaurant before filming was over.



Originally hired as part of a nine person barstaff, Carducci was immediately promoted to wine steward. He arrived each day at 11 am to receive and stock wine. After hours of lugging and unpacking heavy boxes, he would freshen up, put on a jacket, and work the floor of the restaurant as wine steward until the end of the night. For his services, he was paid the same as a bartender, even though the steward's work hours are much longer.

Carducci said he tried to maintain a positive and professional attitude because he was grateful for the chance to work on the project. Then something odd happened. Carducci says Rocco offered him a promotion to beverage manager. Since the new position would require a big commitment he told Rocco he would think about it overnight and give him an answer the next morning.

Later that day, the staff was abuzz about Lola, the bartender who had quit the day before and was wooed back by Rocco with the offer of a Vespa motor scooter and promotion to beverage manager, *the same position offered to Carducci*.

Carducci says after the terms of Lola's return became known morale around the restaurant grew very low. It especially disturbed Topher Goodman, one of Rocco's best waiters, (who Carducci calls "a shining light") who quit and walked out.

The final straw for Carducci came the next day when management at Rocco's did not pay him or members of the kitchen and waitstaff in a timely manner for work they performed over the course of several weeks. That issue was the subject of Episode 5 of *The Restaurant* where three cooks quit for non-payment of wages and an apologetic DiSpirito took out a loan from AmEx (product placement to the nth degree) to cover employees' paychecks and back wages.

"I was employed by the house as a salaried employee, I didn't make money from tips," he explained. "In three weeks of work at Rocco's, I had only been paid \$100. I was commuting an hour each way from New Jersey and needed the rest of my wages to pay my rent. I was told on Monday that paychecks would be in the next day. I got up very early on Tuesday so I could get to the restaurant, get my paycheck and pay my landlord. When I got there, Laurent, the manager, told me the checks were not there."

So what did the starving actor do? "I knew I had to make a decision, I needed money and I couldn't survive without it. I told Laurent I would take a few days off to work at the bar where I used to work and make some much needed cash. I told him to call me when the cameras left and things were in a normal flow."

Laurent asked him to stay, but Carducci said he couldn't. To his credit, Carducci says Laurent pulled some bills out from his pocket and offered them to Carducci until he got his paycheck and could pay him back. Carducci didn't receive his check until three days later. And despite several entreaties from Rocco's, he hasn't returned.

Anthony Bourdain, celebrated author of *Kitchen Confidential* and star of *A Cook's Tour* on the Food Network was a line cook for several years and knows firsthand what it's like to work in a restaurant and not get paid on time.

HOT TOPICS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

SPECIAL FEATURES

QUICK SEARCH

MISCELLANEOUS

Says Mr. Bourdain on the subject:

[Going] three weeks without pay is completely unacceptable -- cooks are not partners, lenders, or investors -- and when ownership or management is late with payroll, it's usually because the kitchen staff is thought to be the most vulnerable - - and most likely to not put up too much of a fight. The thinking being, "What are they gonna do? Quit?"

If the cooks are considered unlikely to do so in the short term, it's them who get screwed. You can be sure that the liquor company, the dry goods purveyor, the florist and the refrigeration repair service are not so forgiving. It becomes truly grotesque when the cooks -- and let's not forget, dishwashers and porters -- who are paid little and often support whole families -- are shafted while the owner continues to drive around in a new Jag.

Kitchen crew are expected to show up on time every day -- and do a million little things exactly the right way at the right time. Which, presumably, they do. Management is expected to do one thing: pay them on time, the agreed amount. To do otherwise is a contemptuous and contemptible betrayal.

What would Anthony Bourdain do if he were in Tad Carducci's position and was promised his pay but when he showed up the check wasn't in?

If you are in financial extremis, and you ask me -- beforehand -- if you can pay me late (not my cooks), and I agree, I have basically agreed to become a lender. Fine. But if you don't have my money when you said you would? You treat me like a fucking idiot? Recall the Henry and Jimmy collect from Maury scene in Goodfellas: "Give me my money! The money! The money! Where's my fucking money!" I have been told by cooks that I actually increase fearsomely in size in such circumstances. I know that my vision gets blurry and that I have been known to throw heavy objects. I think the term is "killing rage."

Lucky for Rocco he didn't have Mr. Bourdain on his staff during this time.

Speculative questions about Rocco's payroll fiasco abound. Was management at Rocco's confused or mixed up? How could they not have money for payroll yet throw a lavish party shortly thereafter at the Hamptons? Could it be that withholding pay from the staff was (gasp!) simply a plot contrivance so that the show's sponsor, AmEx, could bail Rocco out and emerge as a hero?

No one but Rocco's management seems to know the answer. And, fortunately, everyone at the restaurant was eventually paid. Now that time has passed, Tad Carducci says he harbors no ill will against Rocco's. "I came away with new friendships and solid connections within the restaurant business," he said, satisfied.

Getting the last word in on the subject of Rocco and *The Restaurant*, Anthony Bourdain opined, "I think the best thing that ever happened to Emeril [LaGasse] was that his sitcom was cancelled so quickly. Before it left a hideous taste in everybody's mouth and made the whole celeb chef racket yesterday's news. I fear Rocco will not be so lucky."

Lucky or not, in Sunday's final episode, Rocco announced that he will be serving up a second helping of *The Restaurant* next summer. Pass the Tic Tacs.

[Click here for eGullet's discussion of *The Restaurant*](#)

Tad Carducci is tending bar at The Long Valley Pub & Brewery in New Jersey. He can be seen as a guardian angel in the indie film *In The Strangest Places*, which is currently making the film festival circuit. This fall, he is shooting another indie film in Vancouver.

Patricia Gay is a reporter for the *New Fairfield Citizen News* and a paralegal. She is also the former First Selectwoman of New Fairfield, Connecticut, and resides there with her husband and two children. She teaches an annual specialty cooking class to raise funds for local charities.

Image courtesy of Tad Carducci