

# What Can You Learn From Your Favorite Indie Restaurant?

By Amy Knebel



PHOTO: DINOTTO RISTORANTE

Like indie owned readers and other small businesses, independently owned restaurants stand out in ways big box or chain businesses cannot. This includes the stellar customer service, unique business profiles, one-of-a-kind experiences and much more. An example of this is Dinotto Ristorante in Chicago's Old Town neighborhood, which operates as a family managed restaurant and is known for their inviting customer experience.

Here at Retail Minded we not only shop indie, we eat indie as well. Over the past few months, we've had some fantastic meals. These restaurants all boasted fantastic food, excellent customer service and an inviting atmosphere that made us want to come back and become repeat customers. Seeing these places with long wait lines and waitlists for reservations got us thinking. What were they doing so right to make business so good? More importantly, what lessons could indie retailers learn from their food business siblings?

Retail Minded talked with three indie restaurateurs to learn more. Steven Hamile of Vine on Hilton Head Island, S.C., Chef Dino Lubbat of Ristorante Dinotto in Chicago, IL, and Beth Black of FOODE in Fredericksburg, VA shared the thoughts and practices that have propelled them to great success and strong presences in their communities.

## Attitude Really is Everything

Each person we spoke to emphasized that your mindset toward your business has a significant contribution to your success. Lubbat at Dinotto keeps one idea central in how he and his staff approach their business. "My attitude is that the restaurant is an extension of my own kitchen, and I treat customers like they are guests in my own home. When they come here it is just an extension of our hospitality at home. It

is the biggest, yet most simple thing to remember."

At Vine, Hamile keeps his sights set high. "Perfection is attainable if it is economically feasible. We remove items or eliminate things if we can't execute them perfectly because we have a love, a passion and a pride in what we do. You can't succeed without remembering that every dish that goes out and every customer interaction is an expression of you."

Black at FOODE is driven by a concept of approachability. "Great food should be accessible to everyone in a relaxed atmosphere. As a result of the recent economic downturn, we thought outside of the box to put most of our money where it's most important to us, which is on the plate."

## Your Employees are Stand-Ins

For you, that is. They represent your brand when you aren't there. All three restaurateurs had strong statements when it came to the hiring, training, and discipline of their respective staffs. Hamile eschews some traditional industry hiring practices. "One of my core philosophies is how I hire based on honesty and integrity. Anyone can be taught a trade, but you can't teach honesty. Next I look for personality and people who are career industry people who enjoy the art of being a professional waiter." He continues to explain how he invests in

teaching his staff. "I train from the bottom, up. Everyone starts as a dishwasher because that's the most important role, really, in a restaurant. Without a dishwasher, there is no service. Then I train staff as food runners and bussers for an extended period of time so they can really learn and understand the food before they are server in front of customers talking about the food. My staff are also taught to become constant observers so that they can anticipate the needs of a customer and not react. In that way, we are continually challenging ourselves to see if we can exceed a customer's expectations."

Black has found success with a similar thought process when she is hiring. "I don't hire traditional servers. I hire nice and really smart people who can help grow this company and share its message. When you hire people like that, the power of small business lies in harnessing their creativity and their minds to make this business even better."

Lubbat adds another dimension to hiring. "Part of our charm and success lies in the longevity of many of our employees. We stress that we are family and family tries to keep each other happy and take care of each other. When there is a bump in the road, the first priority becomes taking care of the customer first, then deal with any issues at the end of shift. I empower my staff with the responsibility and leeway to fix problems themselves."

## Know Your Customer, Product & Market

With years of customer service experience, Hamile has learned to not to compete with the broader market. "I identify a market and recognize what's not here yet so I can fill a void or a niche. I research my competition to see what they are doing and make sure that I am meeting my customers' needs by giving them something they don't have the ability to replicate anywhere else or at home. I also take time to really listen to and consider my customers' input, which then becomes the genesis for any changes if needed. For example, this area is saturated with certain foods, so we retooled the current menu and kitchen staff to accommodate that menu so customers are getting something that has no comparison anywhere else."

Lubbat emphasizes the power of reading a customer. "People pick Dinotto because they are comfortable and know they will be taken care of. I know the little things add up in creating loyalty, that perfect martini for a stressed-out mom and crayons

for her child. Maybe it's a special menu request; as long as the ingredients are in the kitchen, we'll make it. Customers are spending money here, so we do what it takes, food, service, atmosphere, you name it, to keep them coming back."

Black attributes the customer and market study that went into FOODE's business plan as a pillar of their success. "We studied the local customer base in detail, knowing that would be the bulk of our business and that we couldn't rely solely on tourists. We figured out what they wanted and what the area

needed. We let customers know up front, in our print materials and from our host, what we are about. It's a break from tradition for some people, but they love it. We also reward our locals with a ten percent discount if they live in our local zip code."

## Outside the Box Thinking Pays Off

Black credits a non-traditional concept with helping to create a unique and functional atmosphere. At FOODE, a host greets you with menus, takes you to a table and gets you settled in with utensils and a drink. After you order from the counter, a runner brings your food to you, and a self-service bar is there for drink refills and whatever else you might need. "In order to put the money into the food, we had to give up something when it came to tableside service and table element costs. For us, it's more valuable to give you great food in a relaxed atmosphere so that we might see you again."

Hamile relies only on word of mouth advertising. "If you're good, you are busy. An aggressive marketing campaign makes you wonder if people are coming in because of your food or because of the campaign. My customers are loyal and cutting edge, so I know they are sharing their experiences with others."

When it comes to monitoring the restaurant, Lubbat immerses himself in a different role in the restaurant on a rotating basis. "I rotate through roles so I'm well aware of everything that's going on. I spend a lot of time in different places, but not on a predictable schedule. This helps me maintain good relationships with everyone, front and back of house, and also allows me to put out little fires ASAP."

Indie retailers can always look outside their own industry for ideas to make their businesses grow and thrive. Next time you go out to eat, ask yourself what you can learn from your favorite corner bistro.

## HUNGRY FOR MORE?

Here are some key takeaways:

- ◆ Decide what your business beliefs are. Then live by them.
- ◆ Hire good quality people and then invest the time to train them to become the employee that you want.
- ◆ Know what makes you unique in your market and emphasize that. Don't be tempted to copycat.
- ◆ Customers first. Period. Always.
- ◆ Your brand of hospitality can keep the door busy or keep it closed.
- ◆ Think about how customers perceive their experience in your store and retool as necessary.
- ◆ Your store's environment speaks volumes, so strive to create surroundings that customers want to be in and come back to.