



A lifetime of service

As the longest serving waiter at one of Sydney's top five-star hotels, Claude Stein has served royalty and prime ministers, models and movie stars. He talks to MICHELE TYDD about the ups and downs of his job.

When super-waiter Claude Stein pulls on his white cotton gloves you know he means business.

It signals a VIP is within range, when not as much as a fingerprint on a glass or piece of cutlery is allowed to mar the dining experience.

"It's more to heighten the sense of occasion," says Stein, the longest serving waiter at Sofitel Wentworth in Sydney.

He has whipped out the gloves for the likes of Queen Elizabeth II - twice - former prime ministers John Howard and Paul Keating, and the first man on the moon Neil Armstrong. "I've not yet met Mr Rudd but his daughter lunched here recently and she was exquisite," Stein says.

He has mingled with the world's most beautiful women from screen legends such as Sophia Loren to Princess Diana and supermodel Jennifer Hawkins.

The waiting game has provided Stein, 62, with a remarkable career that has so far spanned 45 years in Europe and Australia. Thirty of those years have been with the Wentworth, and the management recognises Stein's worth as one of its most senior and respected waiters.

Stein, from Alsace in France, did a four-year hospitality course after leaving school that covered a range of topics necessary for running upper-end hotels.

"I chose to focus on waitering because I

didn't want to be locked in to the office or the kitchen," he says.

With study and his compulsory military stint completed, Stein travelled Europe before settling in Australia in the 1970s.

"There were many differences I noticed here ... waitering is not a profession in Australia - it is something you do on the side while you are doing something else like studying," he says.

"Guests are also different, they are perhaps a little less discerning than in Europe and in some ways that is good because they are less demanding."

But there are exceptions. When the Wentworth did not have former prime minister Bob Hawke's brand of cigar, he suggested Stein "run down the road" to fetch some.

"Now there is a demanding man - but he did tip me \$20," he says with a laugh.

His largest tip was \$1000 he shared some years ago when he and another waiter were assigned to a corporate table.

"These days the tips are pooled and shared equally among the staff," Stein says.

While most guests are courteous and engaging, Stein says rudeness does rear its head occasionally.

"Rudeness and making a complaint are two different things," he says. "When a guest complains there is usually a legitimate concern that can be sorted.

"But rudeness seems more to do with personal problems or background and, therefore, should never be taken personally by wait staff.

"I once had a man slap me after a series of exchanges when we perhaps both got a little smart.

"He came after me later to try to apologise but I would have nothing to do with him.

"It taught me that arguing was no way to deal with the problem and that is something we try to drum into younger staff."

Stein says the job can have its drawbacks after hours, especially when he and his partner dine out or go on holidays.

"It makes you far more aware of slackness," he says.

"The things that annoy me? If I ask for a drink I like to have it within two minutes and if I ask for coffee I'd like it to be hot or at least warm, but I don't let those feelings spoil the experience."

Looking back, Stein says he would not have wanted any other job.

"When you work in a place like this there is always something happening - we once had a guest who threatened to jump from a balcony after she lost heavily on the stock market," he recalls.

"Every day is different and that makes going to work interesting and enjoyable."



Australian model Jennifer Hawkins.



Legendary astronaut Neil Armstrong

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Former prime minister Paul Keating.



Queen Elizabeth II.



Screen siren Sophia Loren



The Garden Court Restaurant at the Sofitel Wentworth in Sydney



Claude Stein has spent a lifetime waiting on the rich and famous