

The Schmooze

Stories with a Yiddish Twist

“TSVEY” (2) THINGS A WAITRESS DOESN’T WANT TO HEAR:
“IS THE TIP INCLUDED?” and
“I’M NOT PAYING FOR SUCH A MEAL!”

The Yiddish words meaning, “Is the tip included” is “Tsi iz dos trinkgelt arayn-gerekhent?”

“I’m not paying for such a meal” is “Ikh batsol nit far aza esen.”

*The Yiddish word for “waitress” is “kelnerin.” A “waiter” is “kelner.”
Some other essential Yiddish and non-Yiddish words:

“menu”/”menyu”	menu
“geshmak” -	tasty
“chazerei” -	food that is awful, junk or garbage
“nosh” -	to nibble; a light meal
“ess” -	eat
“Vos vilstu esn?”	What do you want to eat?
“fresser” -	a big eater
“Er frest vi a ferd” -	He eats like a horse.
“Er est vi noch a krenk” -	He eats as if just recovered from a sickness
“Ich bin hungrik” -	I’m hungry.
“Persona Non Grata” -	Poor tipper (New York Magazine, Competition Number 647)
“Fare Due Passi” -	Not a bad meal for two bucks. (New York Magazine, Competition Number 647)

by
Marjorie Gottlieb Wolfe



Syosset, New York

Did you hear about the restaurant patron who said to his waitress: “Two eggs, please. Don’t fry them a second after the white is cooked. Don’t turn them over. Not too much

grease (“fets”). Just a pinch of salt. No pepper. Well, waitress, what are you waiting for?” Waitress: “The hen’s name is Eleanor--is that all right?”

Jessie Mueller, who was last seen on Broadway as a King, is coming back as a waitress. Theater producers Barry and Fran Weissler said that the Tony Award-winning Mueller will star in the musical adaptation of the 2007 film, “Waitress.”

“Waitress,” which starred Keri Russell in the film, tells the story of a waitress, Jenna, and expert pie (“pai”) maker trapped in a small-town diner and a loveless marriage. When a baking contest (“konkurs”) in a nearby county offers her a chance at escape, Jenna must weigh her commitments against a rare shot at freedom and recognition.

The Los Angeles Times Magazine wrote, waitresses “are the cement of society. In diners as bleak and lonely as an Edward Hopper painting, they feed the hungry, cheer the weary, solace the defeated, and rally the disunited.”

In 1945 Joan Crawford in the film, “Mildred Pierce,” wanders the streets in search of work. She gets a job at a downtown restaurant. Eve Arden “gives her a trial.” Crawford enjoys the tips and the bustling atmosphere. Eventually she opens several restaurants and becomes wealthy (“raykh”). Few actresses achieved Crawford’s financial heights.

Let’s examine some facts about the waitresses of today and yesterday:

1903 The Jewish Daily Forward reported that a new word had entered the Yiddish language: “oyesen”--eating out at a restaurant.

1912 A disproportionate number of single waitresses lived apart from their families. A 1912 study of Chicago waitresses stated that “the majority of girls DO NOT live at home.” A Consumers’ League survey in 1915 found that 34% of the female hotel and restaurant workers lived with friends, rather than with family or relatives.

1916 In 1916, the custom was to tip 10% of the sum paid for the lunch or dinner.

1920 38% of waitresses were borders (the highest of any occupational category). Waitressing was an occupation dominated by full-time workers until the 1960s The part-time “one-meal” girl accounted for only a small proportion of the trade.

1929 A N. Y. Dept. of Labor survey tabulated the marital status of women

workers by industry. 35% of waitresses were either widowed, separated, or divorced, more than twice that of any occupational group.

1930s 90% of restaurants in NYC and 82% of those in upstate NY, furnished free (“umzist”) meals to their employees. Decades later, the majority of food service workers nationwide still received at least one free meal a day. Ironically, the lowest-paid workers were often the ones denied meals. Woolworth paid its lunch-counter workers rock-bottom wages and were forbidden (“awser”) to eat or drink on the firm.

1929-39 “di depresye” (The Depression)

During “di depresye”, work days for waitresses in Delaware extended over 13 hours; in Florida, 90% worked 7 days, and “70% of the white women, principally waitresses, had an overall spread of 12 hours or over.” One sufferer complained to Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, that at a local bakery and luncheonette the waitresses were “compelled to work 12 hours a day without even [being] allowed to sit down and eat their midday meal in peace.” Every third week, they received one day off.

1936 A waitress described the help’s kitchen (“di kikh”): “There were no chairs, only benches; and on them were heaped dirty dishes (“di keylim”), clothes, everything, so we usually eat standing up. We have to wait until the last customer is out, and at night that means 10 o’clock.”

1940 By 1940, the recommended tip had inched up to 12%, and soon shifted to 15 and 20%.

After the 1940s, food servers received as much if not more in tips than in wages.

1946 An Atlantic Monthly columnist proclaimed tipping to be “undemocratic, dishonest, and destructive...and urged American citizens to refrain from the habit.”

1947 One waitress at Schrafft’s complained of the older (“elter”) women customers who would treat them like personal servants. “Where’s my maid?” the women [customers] had been known to call out, and the maidlike uniforms and aprons that the waitresses

had to wear reinforced the image.

1950s and 60s

The Census Bureau for the 1950s and 1960s revealed that 28% of waitresses, but only 22% of all working women were divorced, widowed or separated.

Being a “Stouffer’s girl” in the 1950s meant wearing “five-eyelet” Oxford shoes, full slips, no hairpins or jewelry, and passing the daily girdle (“korset”) check.

LATE 50s and ‘60s

At the Catskills’ peak, in the late ‘50s and ‘60s, millions of mostly Jewish families loaded their Studebakers and Ramblers and headed up Route 17 to the Concord and Grossinger’s.

One hotel in the Catskills had a system whereby all newcomers began at the back of the dining room (“der estsimer”) on the tier farthest from the kitchen. If your work met with favor, you moved steadily toward the center, closer to the kitchen doors and to the largest tips which came from the middle-aged manufacturers, clubowners, and gangsters who occupied the tables in the central tiers.

Source: “In the Catkills: A Century of Jewish Experiences in the Mountains” by Phil Brown

UNIFORMS

Until the late 1950s, most restaurants either required waitresses to pay for their uniforms or to rent them from the employer. Employees might also be responsible for laundry (“dos vesh”) bills and the cost of other items such as their pads and pencils.

Some employers had stringent dress codes that resulted in additional costs for employees. Many large restaurant chains and hotels required hairwaves and manicures. Other waitresses complained that they had to buy expensive (“tayer”) sheer stockings every week to wear with their short uniform. These were necessary (“neytik”) because her legs would be more attractive to the traveling salesmen who made up her clientele.

1970s

By the 1970s, estimates range from half to some 2/3 of waitresses total income was derived from gratuities.

Note: In 2013, "The Unofficial Goldman Sachs Guide To Being A Man" was a viral hit and included these pieces of advice:

"Tip more than you should."

"Ask for a salad instead of fries."

"Don't split a check."

"Desserts are for women. Order one and pretend you don't mind that she's eating yours."

1979 Frances Donovan estimated that of the waitress work force she observed, 50% were married, 10% unmarried, and a full 40% divorced. (Later regional studies consistently presented waitressing as an occupation employing large numbers of married women with husbands absent, as well as many divorced and widowed women.)

1980 James "Doc" Blakely ("Handbook of Wit and Pungent Humor") tells the following joke: Said the cute little waitress, slipping up beside the customer: "I've got deviled kidneys, calves' brains, pigs' feet, chicken livers, and..." "Forget it, sister," replied the customer, "I've got a headache, eczema, fallen arches, corns, a bunion, three warts, and an empty stomach. Tell your troubles to someone else, and bring me some ham and eggs."

1987 Rabbi Jack Moline ("Growing Up Jewish - Or, why is this book different from all other books?"), says some Jews fall into the category named "GREPS"--Gastronomically Reawakened Ethnic Preppies.

GREPS: "They've tried pasta primavera, they've tried granola, and they know sushi like I know sushi! Now all they want is pastrami on rye with a pickle from Guss's on Essex. You can recognize them by their favorite old-time songs: "Gimme a Little Knish, Will Ya, Huh?" and "I've Kasha Under My Skin."

1989 The 1989 Zagat New York City Restaurant Survey had the following comment about the waiters at Ratner's on Delancey Street:

"By default, this Lower East Side breakfast 'institution' is the best kosher dairy restaurant in New York, with 'heavenly heartburn' and 'elderly' waiters who serve 'insults on onion rolls."

Jimmy Breslin, New York Newsday writes: “Don Peppe Vesuvio Restaurant, Lefferts Blvd. and South Conduit Ave. in Richmond Hill, Queens. Look into the kitchen as the waiters and chefs scream at each other. A fight at first. Then you hear that the bitterness is over a horse that lost at Aqueduct, right around the corner. Then the waiters bring out tubs of mussels and clams. One of the world’s great restaurants. Caters to racetrack people with taste.”

Source: NYC Access by Richard Saul Wurman

1995 A survey conducted by The Zagat NYC Restaurant Guide found that one (1) percent of New Yorkers ADMIT to tipping less than 15%, lower than in Los Angeles and San Francisco. 32% say they tip more than 20%, higher than LA or San Francisco.

1994 The Stage Deli now has its longest long-distance reservation (“rezervatsye”). Some 63 Czechs are flying in from Prague, and they want breakfast (“frishtik”) at the Stage. The owners faxed a menu to Prague translated by their own Sylvia Lemur, the Deli’s mini-Ivana Trump, who’ll be the waitress during the delegates brunch.

2000 Rabbi Benjamin Blech (“The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Learning Yiddish”) shares this scene in a Jewish restaurant. The waiter has just completed a marathon back and forth to the kitchen to serve his large table seven courses. Before handing over the check, he asks, “Was ANYTHING satisfactory?”

Rabbi Blech tells the story of the stingy old man who was told he had to leave a tip, so on his way out, he told the waiter: “Buy low, sell high.”

Sherri Steinfeld Maxman was at dinner at the Trattoria dell’Arte in Midtown (NY) when she heard the restaurant’s staff serenading a celebrating diner:

“Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday, TOTAL STRANGER,
Happy birthday to you.”

2003 The New York Times METRO Diary’s, Dorothy Franzblau, told the following true story:

Dear Diary:

Years ago, my mother and I went to Ratner's on the Lower East Side for lunch. Mother was a wonderful cook, and a very picky eater, who rarely ate out. She spent a long time studying the menu, while the waiter shifted from foot to foot.

Finally, he said to her: "Lady, listen to me. Don't listen to the doctors."

2004 The New York Times METRO, May 24, included this letter:

Dear Diary:

My favorite New York waiter story took place some 30 years ago when my boss and I were in the field checking retail stores by way of spying on our competitor's products. We found ourselves in Borough Park, only several blocks from a vegetarian restaurant that was one of Brooklyn's landmark eateries, the Famous, on 13th Avenue.

Our meal was delicious, with marinated herring drowned in onions the piece de resistance. It was accompanied by four kinds of rolls. At the end of the meal, our waiter approached, asking if we were thinking about having dessert. My boss asked what kinds he had.

After the waiter rattled off his list of delectables, the last one being stewed prunes, my boss, with more than a little mischief ("shtiferay") in his voice, asked, "How good are your prunes?"

In a nanosecond the reply came back: "How far away from here do you live?" Mel Poretz

2006 Jack Sirota told this story: Henny Youngman, the famous funnyman, was a Carnegie deli regular, "but as a tipper, he was a bum." He said to me, 'Aren't I a good tipper?' I said to him, 'If this was 1935, you'd be great.' He said, "Jack, I tip \$1 here and \$1 at the Friar's Club." I said, "You're a bum here and a bum there."

Henny Youngman also told a story about a guy who goes into a French restaurant and orders dinner. The waitress appears to disappear ("farshvundn vern") for an hour. The guy screams GENDARME! The waitress comes and says, "Gendarme means policeman." The guy says, "Yeah, I know. There's a hold-up

in the kitchen. Go get my food.”

2011 Eda Suzanne (“Retired Not Expired”) wrote that during her first week at college, she and friends went to a local diner and ordered an Egg Cream. “In the Big Apple this is a mixture of seltzer (club soda), chocolate syrup, and milk.” Her request confused the waiter. He had her repeat it several times before disappearing into the kitchen. The waiter returned with a raw egg floating in a dish of cream.

After Suzanne graduated from college, she drove cross-country. Another confusion (“tsemishung”). She requested straws for her bottle of soda (which the menu called “pop”). The waitress kept repeating the request, and we kept nodding. The waitress left the table and returned with a bottle of Stroh’s beer--a product unheard of “back East.” Suzanne pantomimed what she wanted, and the waitress said, “Oh, sippers!”

2013 According to “30 Things You Didn’t Know About Working as a Hooters Girl,” “Yes, your Hooters Girl is making a minimum wage. Please tip accordingly.” (Note: “Hooters” celebrated its 30th Anniversary this year.)

In a Reader’s Digest article titled, “50 Secrets Your Waiter Won’t Tell You,” Christopher Fehlinger writes:

In many restaurants, the tips are pooled. So if you have a bad experience with the server, you are also stiffing the bartender who made your drinks, the water boy who poured your water, sometimes the hostess (“gastgeberin”), the food runners, and maybe the other waiters.

Judi Santana said, “The best tippers tend to be middle-class people or people who have worked for everything they have, not the really wealthy (“raykh”) or the kid who inherited the trust fund. Which is not to say that we mind if you use coupons. But when you do, tip on the amount the bill would have been without them.”

Jeremy Burton wrote, “First dates, especially blind Internet dates, are great for tips. You know they’ll probably (“mistome”) order a bottle of wine (“vayn”) and leave a 20-25% tip because he’s showing off.”

2015 Ben's Best Deli, with several locations, tells its customers: "Just don't give your waitress grief, as that will be an extra \$1.00."
:-)

MARJORIE WOLFE loves eating out. Rarely has she told a waitress, "Es iz nit genug gekokht"--This is undercooked--or "Es iz tsu hart"--This is too tough.

Sources: Dorothy Sue Caobble, "Dishing it Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century"

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Marjorie Gottlieb Wolfe is the author of two books:



"Yiddish for Dog & Cat Lovers" and "Are Yentas, Kibitzers, & Tumblers Weapons of Mass Instruction? Yiddish Trivia." To order a copy, go to her website: MarjorieGottliebWolfe.com

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