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Selective Staffing at III Forks Steakhouse One Year In

If you hire the right employees, your restaurant will operate like clockwork.

By: Amanda Baltazar



The Legends Room at III Forks is one of several spaces. III Forks Prime Steakhouse

Tommy Nevill interviewed 3,000 people for 50 available positions before III Forks Prime Steakhouse opened in Hallandale, Florida, in February 2010 but it was worth the work: 70 percent of employees from opening day are still with the restaurant.

“I was very nervous with the pool of people who were coming in for interviews,” says Nevill, the proprietor. “The staff are such an important part of your opening—you have to be able to execute and provide the product that people are coming in for.”

Unfortunately, the pool of people that applied for the jobs wasn’t up to the standards Nevill was seeking, but luckily he started the hiring process six weeks in advance. It wasn’t until a week before the restaurant opened that he found what he calls “A-players.” Nevill was looking for passion beyond anything else, but also:

- Employees who were all about the guest and making a memorable experience
- People who wanted to be part of the restaurant family, not a fly by night
- People who wanted to make a commitment and a difference
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“Being born and raised in the restaurant industry all I know is it’s a passion and you either have it or you don’t. You can’t train people to give memorable experience, or go above and beyond—remember what people ordered last time, their favorite drink, etc.” Nevill says.

To find the core staff that he needed Nevill did everything he could think of including pounding the pavement. He went to local schools, attended seminars, and even visited nearby restaurants to meet the managers and get advice. He also relied heavily on Craigslist.com.

Small tests that Nevill uses to weed out prospective employees are checking they’re professionally dressed and that they are prepared for the interview.

“I like people to have a pen to fill out the application. It tells me whether somebody is ready and focused on what they are doing,” he says. “They have to have gone to some effort for the job.”

And during the interview, he has a favorite question and says it always catches candidates off guard: What’s your favorite dish of the last restaurant you worked at?

Half of the job candidates can’t tell him or can’t describe it to him so it will melt in his mouth, he says. “When I’m hiring a server, if they can’t describe something and sell it to me and make my mouth water, I don’t want to be a part of it.”

Once employees are hired, Nevill also puts a strong emphasis on training. He teaches new hires all the traditional aspects of III Forks but they also go through a butchering class: They learn to clean beef, the different cuts of beef, the different parts of the animal.

“We’re very particular about everything we do in house so servers can go into any detail at the table. It’s a special part of our training. We have a wine program, too: We have a lot of exclusive wines that you can’t find retail and do an extensive training with those. We do at least a teaching of all the types of wines, the taste and what they pair with.”

The 70 percent retention rate at III Forks has paid off and the restaurant’s sales are up 12 to 13 percent over this time last year.

Described as “a contemporary evolution of the classic steakhouse,” III Forks provides typical meals from prime beef to fresh lobster, as well as an extensive wine list.

Separate dining areas break up the space and have different themes, or there’s a patio lounge for those who like to dine al fresco. There are six other III Forks locations, three each in Texas and Florida.