

Restaurant service fees - compulsory tips?



The paying of a tip or a gratuity is entirely at the discretion of the patron. No-one expects us to tip a shop assistant or air hostess for their service - if they did we'd be outraged. "The cost of the service should be included in the price of the goods," we'd argue. And we'd be right...

So it's customary not to tip a shop assistant or cabin crew member, but equally customary, the world over, to tip waiters.

Because of this, many restaurants have got away with paying their waiters little and sometimes nothing, tips being their main or sole earnings, and even covering uniforms and breakages in some cases.

And then came the Sectoral Determination for the Hospitality Sector, introduced by government last year. Among other things, it laid down minimum wages, and suddenly waiters didn't come cheap or free anymore.

This may explain why some restaurants have begun adding a 10% service fee to all bills, which has drawn criticism from consumers on two counts: one, it amounts to a compulsory tip, when tipping should always be at the discretion of the restaurant patron; and two, many patrons don't notice the service fee, add 10% to the total, as they've always done, and unwittingly pay a double tip.

We asked Wendy Alberts of the Restaurant Association of South Africa whether restaurants are entitled to impose a routine 10% service fee on bills.

"There's no such thing as a compulsory tip," she said.

So if you spot a service fee on your bill, you're within your rights to refuse to pay it.

And then decide for yourself how you'd like to tip your waiter, bearing in mind that 10% is the norm.

(Wendy Knowler's advice forms part of today's Consumerwatch show on the issue. Listen to it via the home page, 'Listen to past shows' button on the right of the page.) The paying of a tip or a gratuity is entirely at the discretion of the patron. No-one expects us to tip a shop assistant or air hostess for their service - if they did we'd be outraged. "The cost of the service should be included in the price of the goods," we'd argue. And we'd be right...

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