



Mistie LoNardo (left), president of EyeSpy, laughs with Jen Lemus, one of the managers at Willow Street Pizza in Willow Glen. Willow Street has hired Mistie's 'mystery diners' to come to their restaurants on a regular basis to critique the food and staff. While they don't know who the diners are, they are all familiar with Mistie.

Mystery Guests

'EyeSpy' anonymously gauges customer feedback

By TIFFANY CARNEY

Photographs by JACQUELINE RAMSEYER

As Mistie LoNardo sat at a table in Willow Glen's Willow Street Pizza, she couldn't help but straighten out the silverware on the napkin placed in front of her. As she talked, her eyes darted around as she took a mental note of how she was greeted, how her order was taken and how the

food was served.

For the average person, it's not hard to evaluate the service and quality of food at a restaurant, but for LoNardo, it is her career.

LoNardo is the founder of EyeSpy Critiquing and Consulting. Even when she is not on assignment, she can't stop herself from

conducting mental evaluations.

LoNardo started EyeSpy, a company that sends employees to evaluate restaurants and other businesses in the service industry upon a business owner's request. "Spys" will dine at a restaurant, go to a movie or stay at a resort. After the experience, the EyeSpy employee

writes a review and submits it to that venue so management can use the feedback to make improvements.

"Here is some of our homemade, honey-wheat bread," said the waitress at Willow Street. LoNardo pointed out she did exactly what was required: The

waitress named the bread and announced that it was homemade.

Willow Street was EyeSpy's first customer and remains a customer today. After hearing about her company seven years ago, the owners of the pizza place were hooked. They hired EyeSpy to send in a mystery diner to their

restaurant five times a month to evaluate every aspect of the eatery.

LoNardo conceived the idea for EyeSpy after she went for a job interview at a local restaurant. She was asked to dine there, then to come back and share her experience.

LoNardo gave a full recollection of her experience, including a detailed account of what she liked and didn't like about the atmosphere, service and food.

She was hired on the spot, but turned down the job to start her own business instead.

Right away, she recruited five "spy" friends and a handful of restaurants. EyeSpy now has many clients in and outside of the Bay Area, including Steamers in

'That is the purpose of the evaluation: Is the server following the standard for the restaurant?'

—Mistie LoNardo

Los Gatos, Armadillo Willy's, and almost all the restaurants in Santana Row.

EyeSpy also employs thousands of evaluators who utilize services at a venue, then write a four- to eight-page review within 24 hours.

"Anything encountered in the experience, we evaluate," LoNardo says. "It is a report card for the servers. It is a report card for management."

That write-up is then edited and submitted to management at the venue within 72 hours of the evaluation.

"[Management] gets to see the overall customer's experience," which is often hard data to collect, says LoNardo.

"We can't really know at each table what is going on," says Nancy Reineking, director of operations for the restaurant.

She says it is important to know the service level from the customers' point of view.

Reineking explains that the company uses incentive programs to reward waiters who get excellent reviews. "They know that it could happen at any time. They know we are going to see the evaluation and have a conversation about it," she says. "Accountability is important," she adds, and the restaurant operates around that feedback.



Mistie LoNardo, president of EyeSpy, listens as a server tells her the specials at Willow Street Pizza in Willow Glen. LoNardo has worked for the owners of Willow Street many times, having her 'mystery diners' come in at any given time and critique the food and the service.

One of the customer service touches that Willow Street Pizza enforces is the time it takes a server to bring bread to a customer. Once it's on the table, the manager knows that the customer is being helped.

"You want the restaurant to know how an outsider sees them," says an evaluator from Willow Glen who prefers to remain anonymous. "It gives them specific points to work on in terms of improvement."

Reineking's favorite part of the company is the ability to tailor evaluations to cover specific aspects of the dining experience.

If a restaurant wants to rate the

way a server pours the wine, announces a weeklong special or offers the bread, it can be noted on the evaluation form.

"That is the purpose of the evaluation: Is the server following the standard for the restaurant?" LoNardo says.

LoNardo says EyeSpy evaluators are asked to pay explicit attention to a business, from its

walkway and ambiance down to the light bulbs or ashtrays on outside tables. They note the exchange with the hostess, the walk to their table and how the menus are handed out. Close attention is also paid to customer-waiter interaction, whether managers are present and how food and drinks are delivered.

Evaluators may leave with a full

stomach, but do not leave with full pockets. Instead of being paid for their work, they are given a reimbursement for the meal. On average, evaluators are reimbursed for the cost of two drinks, two appetizers, two entrees and two desserts.

The Willow Glen diner, who has been an employee for nearly two years, says the job requires a keen sense of observation, a good memory and the ability to write well.

"We have a certain level of expectations for our evaluators," LoNardo says, who personally screens each applicant.

The evaluator also says there is a downside. "Sometimes you get a server and your heart breaks for them because you know it is going to be a disaster."

This evaluator doesn't enjoy writing negative evaluations, but says it is all part of the job.

The EyeSpy employee says it can be disappointing, but for the most part, 95 percent are positive experiences.

For more information about EyeSpy, visit www.theeyespy.com or call 408.292.1612.