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Butler School: In Service of Those Who Serve

Butler extraordinaire Christopher Ely teams up with the French Culinary Institute to teach a new generation how to serve, and reinvigorate the business

Christopher Ely is prone to philosophizing about his life's work. "You should be invisible, to a certain point," he explains carefully, wearing a navy blue pinstriped suit and well-polished shoes. "You *exist*, of course, but you *don't*." Ely, of course, is describing the secrets of the manservant trade. As one of New York's most famous butlers, he's enjoyed a storied career that began as a footman at Buckingham Palace and led to a job as the butler and estate manager for philanthropist and power widow Brooke Astor. Ely, 48, does not use the term "manservant." The word, he says, "has such connotation to it."

This is one of the many tips Ely is preparing to pass on to the next generation of butlers, housekeepers, chauffeurs, governesses, housemen, personal assistants, laundresses, and chefs. This week he and Manhattan's French Culinary Institute inaugurate the Estate Management Studies program. Tired of hearing people tell him, "We couldn't get good staff," Ely says, he set out to reinvigorate the entire domestic-service industry with a curriculum that combines its ancient hallmarks—efficiency, decorum, and discretion—with what the institute calls the "contemporary skills necessary to manage modern-day residences."

Ely and FCI founder and Chief Executive Officer Dorothy Cann Hamilton have already developed courses on laundry, household cleaning, and the "practice of being a private chef"—25 hours and \$1,750 each—in addition to a \$1,995, 30-hour "culinary essentials" tutorial. Ely believes he can enlighten and "elevate" his students through his intimate knowledge of linen steaming, towel folding, seafood canapé preparation, and the all-important butlering tenet: invisibility. "It's not like a waiter in a restaurant that's bothering you every two seconds," he says firmly. In all, the FCI is planning a 12-course curriculum.

It also expects a regiment of willing pupils. After a recent hiccup, the help business is on the rise. "It's incredible," says Keith Greenhouse, CEO of the Pavillion Agency, a New York staff placement firm. In the first quarter of 2011, he says, Pavillion received 487 job orders, compared with 283 in the same period in 2009. Through the agency, one young family is looking for someone to "work for both Mr. in his business and Mrs. at home" and "respond to the family's needs at odd hours." A "formal Park Avenue family" wants a cook who can clean silver. The CEO of a fashion house needs a "formally trained housekeeper" to supplant the live-in nanny. According to Ely, a "good" butler should command a salary of about \$80,000 a year.

The resurgence of rich people has triggered a rebirth elsewhere in the industry. "When we hit last summer, that's when all of a sudden the economy really changed. And so by the time we were into September of last year, the placement orders went through the roof. It was like, 'Oh, my God,'" says Charles MacPherson, founder of Charles MacPherson Associates, a Toronto-based butlering academy and placement agency. "People just needed to move on," he says, "and start living their lives again." MacPherson isn't alone in his gratitude for rich people remembering just how rich they are. "From September 2008 until January or maybe even February 2009, I doubt that I made a placement. Not one," says Mary Louise Starkey, president of Starkey International Institute for Household Management in Denver. Starkey, whose organization refers to her either as "Mrs. Starkey" or "the First Lady of Service," says her 2011 first-quarter revenues have "darn near close to doubled" over the same period last year.

This is particularly heartening in light of Mrs. Starkey's recent history. In 2007 the First Lady of Service was the subject of stories in Denver's *Westword* newspaper saying she'd been accused of a physical altercation with a former student. Charges against her were dismissed, Starkey says, and she compares the bad press to Martha Stewart's. Ultimately, says the First Lady, it did "not affect the trust my clients have in me." **However, when such unpleasantness arises, members of Big Help can turn to trade organizations such as the Domestic Estate Managers Assn. in Grosse Pointe Farms, Mich.—the Toastmasters of butlering. It charges \$49.95 per year in dues under the motto, "Serving Those Who Serve Others." And, as with the rest of the service market, Vice-President Mike Wright says his industry is bouncing back.**

All this growth, however, has Ely concerned about the industry's future. "Look at some of these Wall Street people," he says. "Their life starts to expand. And what a lot of them tend to do is get a maid who's looking after somebody else in the building." Maid referrals, he explains, sometimes come from doormen. "So they get this one, and then that one. Then maybe they upgrade, or they want somebody else for the weekend," he says. "But they're not really well-qualified, full-time sort of people, do you know what I mean?"

This failing concerns Cann Hamilton, too. "One of the most amazing things is that people on Wall Street think about assets," she says. Yet they "sit there and say, 'O.K., I have a housekeeper. I don't care if she ruins my drapes or if she ruins my sheets.' Is that penny-wise and pound-foolish?"

Ely believes it is. Standing in the halls of the FCI, his shirt is impeccably laundered—he favors Borax and OxiClean ("marvelous") and dishwashing liquid for the collars and cuffs. According to his syllabus, Ely's laundry course will teach how to "protect buttons and embellishments against damage and deterioration" and to "freshen clothes without washing them." It will show students "the latest organic alternatives," the "fine principles of hand washing," and "the basics of flat drying and boxing delicate garments."

Those tips may help Ely's graduates find work in the current landscape, where, as MacPherson says, "the rich just want to live like rich people." Ely also believes employers may send their current staff to Estate Management Studies for a touch-up. He understands this sort of insatiable quest for butlering perfection. "You want them to do more. You want them to do it better," he says. "I would have people come work with me at Astor's, and then I would show them: 'No, I want it done *this way*.'"



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