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Swiss butler breaks gender barrier

Perfection, concentration, ability and discretion – these are the trademarks of excellent butler service. Zita Langenstein should know: As Switzerland's only woman butler, she has a unique perspective in an industry dominated by men.

Langenstein, 47, says she has always felt inspired by fictional butlers like Anthony Hopkins' character in 'Remains of the Day'.

As a butler, Langenstein has had the chance to rub shoulders with royalty. In 2006, she accompanied one of her butler school colleagues to a Buckingham Palace garden party in honour of the Queen's 80th birthday.

Although there were about 1,500 people at the party, the Queen approached and asked to be introduced to Langenstein. To the lady butler's astonishment and delight, they chatted for about five minutes.

As a professional trained in both the hotel and restaurant industries, Langenstein was head of housekeeping at Basel's Hotel International. She later transferred to the Mövenpick restaurant chain, where she was responsible for all apprentices nationwide.

Yet it took her a full decade to get her foot in the door of the renowned Ivor Spencer International Butler School in London. Langenstein never received a reply to her initial written application, sent in 1989.

She followed up with the school by telephone, and was repeatedly told that somebody would get back to her. They never did; the school wasn't accepting women.

She persisted, and in 1999, Ivor Spencer himself called to tell her that she'd been accepted. However, Langenstein was unable to drop everything and head for London.

But by the winter of 2005, the time was finally right. She left Zurich to spend two months un-

der the tutelage of Spencer and his team.

How does one address royals? ... serve afternoon tea? ... wash a car properly? ... book a table at a busy restaurant? Butlers trained at the Ivor Spencer International School must be able to answer 1,005 such questions.

Despite the vast curriculum, there were no textbooks or paper handouts. Instead, Langenstein and her colleagues learned everything by rote.

The intense school days began at 7.30am and ended at 8.30pm. Some drills were especially demanding. Laden with heavy serving trays, the butlers-in-training had to walk around for 99 minutes at a time. As if that alone weren't challenging enough, each had to balance an empty wine glass on the head.

Some of the tasks – like ironing a newspaper – might seem ridiculous to the average person. But according to Langenstein, there are two good reasons to do so. First, it prevents the ink from smudging the reader's fingers. Second, a coat of starch makes the newspaper easier to read.

Langenstein says that her butler's education has prepared her to handle potentially awkward moments with finesse. Unexpected guests are a prime example.

"We learned how to react professionally if there's a strange face on the pillow in the morning," says Langenstein. According to her, a butler would never talk with the visitor.

"Instead we'd simply ask if 'Mr Lee would perhaps like another tea or some juice today.'"

Today, Langenstein is the head of further education at GastroSuisse. She trains hotel butlers, chauffeurs and gastronomy executives in the finer points of white-gloved service. And whenever she has the chance, she slips back into the role of Zita the butler.

from swissinfo

Linguists unite against English invasion

Largely unnoticed by English speakers, our fellow Europeans are sullenly suffering the colonisation of their native languages by Anglo-American terms.

Linguistics experts met in Bern to share ideas on how to deal with the growing language divide within French, German and Italian-speaking communities. Behind the laughter at the many comic examples of pseudo-English which have popped up, there is dismay at the unstoppable stream of borrowings and fear for the very survival of the continent's languages.

Guest speaker Alfred Gilder, terminology chief at the French finance ministry, captured the mood of the conference with the battle-cry "modernise or die". Gilder summed up his philosophy of linguistic integrity by using a drinking metaphor. "I like Bordeaux very much and I like whisky too, but I would never mix the two!"

A point echoed by several speakers was that English has become so dominant in certain fields that courses in some disciplines are now exclusively being taught in English in some countries.

Swiss Vice-chancellor Thomas Helbling thinks that Switzerland, with its tradition of language diversity, had possibly less to fear from the influence of English. But he stresses that the home languages need to be preserved. He thinks that the Swiss should learn a second national language before English.

English itself has absorbed countless influences – from Latin, French and Hindi, to name but a few.

It is not a question of denying the necessity of an international language of communication, a lingua franca; what must be avoided is that the lingua franca becomes lingua unica.

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