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## Service the key to long career

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New Plymouth fine dining restaurant Andre's L'Escargot celebrates 35 years in business this week. Owner Andre Teissonniere sat down with

Daily News reporter John Anthony and shared his recipe for success.

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Sloppy service and a lack of professionalism is jeopardising New Zealand's hospitality reputation on the global stage, says experienced French restaurateur Andre Teissonniere.

Having owned and operated one of New Plymouth's most acclaimed fine dining restaurants for 35 years - Andre's L'Escargot - Teissonniere has some authority on the matter.

New Zealand's hospitality industry should be putting more focus on providing a higher standard of service in order to attract wealthy patrons, he said.

"If you want to generate income and pay your staff well you need to cater for the people with the money," Teissonniere said.

"We're pretty casual in New Zealand which is a good thing but when you're in a service industry you can't be too casual."

The toughest thing about running a fine dining restaurant, especially in New Plymouth, was the lack of experienced hospitality staff, he said.

"It's really difficult to get good people here.

"This is a major problem in the industry."

In saying that, Teissonniere was extremely pleased with the team he did have and attributed much of the restaurant's success to his staff.

The reason Taranaki and New Zealand had a limited pool of talent came down to hospitality work not being widely regarded as a legitimate profession in New Zealand, he said.

In France Teissonniere always knew hospitality would be his life trade.

Such a career path was common throughout the world today, he said.

"Even in Melbourne it's not unusual to see a waiter who is 50 years old but here it's totally unheard of."

Hospitality was a career choice people should be proud of, he said.

"It's to be professional, to have pride in what you're doing and being able to communicate well."

Teissonniere opened his fine dining restaurant Andre's L'Escargot - French for snail - on New Plymouth's Devon St East in 1977, one year after immigrating to New Zealand.

Teissonniere's parents were hotel owners in France and well before arriving in New Plymouth as a 26-year-old he knew hospitality was his calling.

"That's all I knew."

There were only a handful of establishments serving international flavours in New Plymouth at the time but even then the food standard was relatively high, he said.

Andre's was unlike any other dining experience in Taranaki and locals took to it from the start, he said.

"When you think about it they had probably never seen anything like what we were offering."

Gourmet French dishes filled the menu: Crayfish, king prawns, snails, venison, duckling and gratinee a l'oignon onion soup to name a few.

"A lot of things were very similar as they are today but the prices were different."

A steak at Andre's in those days cost \$4.60. Today it's \$36.50.

In 1984 the bistro moved to its current location, an historic building on Brougham St, which Teissonniere bought for less than \$80,000.

That price was basically for just the facade, he said.

"Inside it was a shell. There was nothing.

"The only thing that was valuable was the front."

For more than three decades Andre's clientele has been made up mostly of regular customers, he said.

"We've always had a good name.

"We've got a good following."

Repeat customers came not only from New Plymouth but also Wellington, Auckland, Christchurch, Australia and the United States, he said.

"It's all repeated business."

And they have high expectations.

"They ask for more from us."

Teissonniere has a clear idea of Andre's status in Taranaki.

"I really think we set the standard in town - and I'm not being big headed."

Teissonniere has high praise for Taranaki's hospitality industry, although he does feel it's too crowded.

Two people he particularly admired were Ozone Bean Store owner Craig Macfarlane and Chaos Cafe owner Kerry Vosseler.

On Macfarlane: "He's an entrepreneur and I respect what he does."

And Vosseler: "She deserves all the praise she gets. She runs a tight ship and I admire that."

Over the years Andre's has faced tough times including three recessions: 1987, 1991 and 2008, he said.

But one of the hardest periods was after the French bombing of the Rainbow Warrior, he said.

"That wasn't a very good time for me."

The name Andre's L'Escargot is a play off the famous French restaurant L'Escargot - one of the oldest in Paris, opening in the 16th century.

The food at Andre's was simple, almost traditional French peasant food, Teissonniere said. "Our food is not complicated - not at all."

Head chef and eight time national Beef and Lamb Hallmark award winner Erua Stockman is a sensational cook, Teissonniere said. "He will follow the recipe to the letter and he is consistent.

"I'm very lucky to have him."

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CAPTION:

Food buff: New Plymouth's Andre's L'Escargot restaurant clocks up 35 years in business this week. Owner Andre Teissonniere says the secret to success is finding the right staff and providing delicious and consistent food.

Picture: ROBERT CHARLES/FAIRFAX NZ

Fine wine: Andre's L'Escargot waiter Karel Krtek pours a glass of wine.

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