

Antonio's restaurant

# Training, cross-industry learning key to service quality

By Patricia B. Mirasol  
Reporter

BY PRIORITIZING continuous staff training and seeking insights and inspiration from diverse industries, restaurants can ensure that their service remains at the highest level, consistently meeting or surpassing customer expectations, according to an industry expert.

Continuous training ensures that staff members stay updated and equipped with the necessary skills to provide exceptional service, Antonio "Tony Boy" M. Escalante, founder of Antonio's restaurant in Tagaytay, said in an interview with *BusinessWorld*.

Meanwhile, the practice of seeking inspiration from other industries fosters innovation and fresh perspectives, he noted.

"The most important thing is keeping the quality of the service," Mr. Escalante said. "Training the staff is continuous; learning from other industries is continuous."

His staff, including the pastry chef, undergo training in countries such as Switzerland.

Mr. Escalante himself is set to fly to Turkey in July to learn more about the said country's grilling techniques.

"I'm not going to cook Turkish food; I want to learn how they grill," he said. "Their techniques there are fantastic."

A 2022 study by catering technology firm Zupa revealed that a lack of staff training is attributed to various operational issues, including staff happiness, low morale, lack of innovation, and even food wastage.

"By ignoring the need for critical training and engagement programs that allow staff to grow in confidence and innovate, hospitality businesses are creating a vicious, self-perpetuating cycle which directly impacts their revenue, customer relationships and

future profitability," Neil Shayle, ex-chef and commercial director at Zupa, said in a news release.

"It is vital that operators recognize training as a cornerstone of their people strategy," he added.

At the same time, the Zupa report highlighted that restaurants are also concerned about the quality of customer service.

"In fact, 96% of respondents reported this as a key issue and of those, 47% said they believed it was linked to lack of staff training," Zupa said.

For Mr. Escalante, it is important to "treat your people right."

"My dream is to give profit-sharing to my people, and I think it will be soon," he said.

He also advised restaurants to develop core values and establish a strong foundation.

It is important to clearly define the brand's unique identity, what it stands for, and the values that drive its operations, he said. This serves as the bedrock for making decisions, engaging with customers, and cultivating an overarching culture within the establishment, he also said.

Handling a company with 554 employees requires striking a balance between delegation and micromanagement, as noted by Mr. Escalante.

According to him, delegation plays a vital role in fostering teamwork and empowering employees to take ownership of their responsibilities. On the other hand, micromanagement aids in maintaining quality standards, ensuring consistency, and effectively addressing potential issues, he added.

Antonio's has developed standardized processes for procurement, as well as training and procurement, for cost management and knowledge sharing within the group.

**HOW IT STARTED**

Nestled among the picturesque rolling hills of Tagaytay, Anto-

nio's has earned a reputation as a culinary destination that celebrates the tradition of fine dining.

"I wanted the restaurant to feel like home," Mr. Escalante said.

"It's really a passion for me to entertain and cook. I want to open a restaurant where, if it doesn't work, it becomes my home," the flight steward-turned-chef added.

Within two months of its opening in November 2002, Mr. Escalante found himself undertaking multiple roles as the receptionist, purchaser, and chef, as the seating capacity of his mom-and-pop establishment swiftly escalated from the initial 40 to 80 and eventually 120.

It was the customers who helped shape who he became, he said.

"Most of the guests who came here first were people who had vacation homes here, or out in Nasugbu, [Batangas]. They had discerning palates... These are clients who know what they want," he said. This, he added, compelled him to be attentive and excel in his craft.

"I consider the availability of ingredients in the market and draw inspiration from my travels," he said.

Antonio's sources local as much as possible, with exceptions such as lettuce. Although he supports local farmers, local lettuce wilts after three days, said Mr. Escalante.

"When I order from Australia, my lettuce comes in a box and stays 10 days. *Mauubos 'yun lahat* (Those will all be utilized)," he said. "Wastage *ko* (My wastage) is only 2 to 5%."

Antonio's also differentiates itself through its unique surroundings. The restaurant exudes the ambiance of a colonial house's dining room.

**SPOTTING OPPORTUNITIES**

One recent obstacle the company had to overcome was the abrupt halt in operations due to the COVID-19 lockdowns.



ANTONIO "TONY BOY" M. ESCALANTE

"It was five months of agony," Mr. Escalante said.

However, even amidst the lockdown restrictions, there was a silver lining.

The company was fortunate as it was able to rehire most of its staff after two months, according to Mr. Escalante.

"When they said that a 30% capacity was allowed... can you imagine, 30%? That's a lot of numbers," he said. "We're not a restaurant boxed in the malls or with just one entrance, so *walang bintang* (and therefore didn't have any windows), so we survived."

It also helped that a lot of people wanted to go out of town.

"We were full packed of the 30% every day," he added.

Another opportunity was the decision to expand and open restaurant branches in Metro Manila after 21 years in the business.

"In the past, I had been approached about opening branches, but I didn't feel adequately prepared at that time," Mr. Escalante said. "As the business grew, I realized that it was necessary to seek outside investors or partners."

Having the support and resources of investors, he said, becomes "crucial" when pursuing expansion or reaching new markets.

"When banks talk to you, [they ask], 'What's your succession?'" Mr. Escalante said. "You really have to think about succession."

"I knew from the start I didn't want to be forever in the kitchen cooking," he added. "If I did, I would not have been able to branch out."

Expansion is not a decision made in the early stages of one's business, according to Mr. Escalante.

"You have to prepare yourself. You need to have a good product and a strong team, and then you

wait for people to come to you," he said.

"Do not undervalue yourself," he added. "Otherwise, you will be perceived as cheap — and by cheap, I mean they will dictate the terms and undervalue you."

Mr. Escalante acknowledged that it was a risky move when he and his business partner, fellow chef Ricky Sison, left the Mandarin Hotel over two decades ago to establish Antonio's.

"While there may be challenges and competition, it is crucial to remain focused and determined," he said.

"Believe in yourself, your vision, and the quality of your offerings. Your dedication and resilience will play a significant role in overcoming obstacles and attaining long-term success," he added.

**FEEDBACK**

Building a customer base requires consistent effort, according to Mr. Escalante.

It necessitates prioritizing quality and consistency in both food and service, he said.

"I actively listen to customer feedback and consider it seriously, using it as a guide for continuous development and improvement," he added.

"I understand the importance of avoiding stagnation and constantly striving to enhance the dining experience."

Among the recognitions received by Antonio's is the distinction of being the only Filipino restaurant included in The Miele Guide to Asia's Finest Restaurants for five consecutive years.

"I never tell my team, 'Hey, we better excel because we need to keep winning,'" Mr. Escalante said. "I always tell them, 'Let's do good, and the financial success will follow.'"

If you start fixating on numbers from the very beginning, "that will hinder your ability to excel because you are already limiting yourself," he added.



## Kaya Founders plans to invest in up to 70 early-stage startups

VENTURE capital firm Kaya Founders is planning to invest in 50 to 70 early-stage startups in the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries, its managing general director said.

The firm has raised \$12 million in a recent funding round.

"We will essentially be continuing what we have been doing over the past two years, but just on a larger scale, with more dry powder to deploy," Kaya Founders Managing General Director Paulo Campos III said in an e-mailed reply to questions on June 16.

Kaya Founders was founded in 2021 by Mr. Campos, the former chief executive officer (CEO) of ZALORA Philippines, along with Lisa Gokongwei-Cheng, the president of Summit Media and senior vice-president of JG Summit, and Constantin Robertz, the CEO of Locad and former CEO of Entrego.

It prioritizes startups that leverage technology to address significant issues in the country, added Mr. Campos.

Recent investments have included companies digitizing the food value chain, healthcare solutions that address unmet needs, and solutions that enable the future of work.

The firm, according to Mr. Campos, is sector-agnostic.

"Instead of focusing on a particular sector, we develop strong beliefs based on trends we observe and gaps we identify," he said.

The company has two upcoming funds aimed at advancing its mission of helping founders achieve scale and impact: the Zero to One Fund, which will focus on accelerating ventures from Day 0, and the One to Ten Fund, which will invest in more mature opportunities showing signs of product-market fit and a path to profitability.

The investment range is expected to be \$150,000 to \$500,000.

In addition to providing capital, the company offers support in terms of legal services, educational materials, and product development. It also provides startup founders with advice from its partners.

As a venture capital firm, Kaya tracks metrics related to company performance and portfolio value to deliver favorable returns to investors, Mr. Campos said.

However, the firm's success is determined by evaluating the value it brings to its founders, he told *BusinessWorld*. "[H]ow we are able to enrich and contribute to the broader tech ecosystem, and whether we are able to advance the goals and values we ultimately stand for — including the digitalization of critical services, job creation, and the economic development of the country at large." — Patricia B. Mirasol

**PURSIGIDO**  
**MAGIPAP**  
**Ma tula ngin**  
**Supportive**  
**Magayut Malasakit**  
**Team Player**  
**MATA LINO**  
**MASIKAP**

**Excellence**  
**DRIVEN TO LEAD**  
**Best Me at McDo**

**Apply now**

[www.mcdonalds.com.ph/careers](https://www.mcdonalds.com.ph/careers) @mcdo\_ph