

Why Can't I Sit Over There? The Place is Almost Empty.

Shôn Ellerton, January 2, 2023

The strange custom of inflexible restaurant seating policies.



One early morning, I got myself ready to meet up with a friend for a cup of coffee at our local beach café located just south of Adelaide. It was during the middle of the week and I expected that it wouldn't be too busy. I arrived early and, indeed, the place wasn't busy with, perhaps, five or six other people there. It was a beautiful morning but a little crisp to be sitting outside, so I chose a nice table by the window, the only one with a comfy L-shaped couch.

An unsmiling woman came over and, rather curtly, said if the table was just for me and I replied that I was waiting for a friend. I had this underlying feeling that this wasn't going to go down so well, and I was right. She reminded me that I had to wait to be seated, an oversight on my part as I failed to see any sign to do so nor was there anyone there to greet me when I arrived. The table I chose had no mention of it being reserved. The café was also quite empty. I would like to point out that this is one of those establishments so common in Australia where you need to stand, often in a queue, to order and pay for your food and drink at the counter. I don't know if this is a cost-cutting exercise, but I never liked this peculiar practice. Totally understandable in a basic café, bar, coffee shop or snack bar, but not in an upmarket café in which you have to wait to be seated.

With a gloomy look on her face, she said that this was for a table for four people. I asked if the table was reserved and if she was expecting a large influx of customers during the next hour or so. I also said that it had a nice view of the sea, whereas all the tables for two were centred in the middle of the room or off to the

side. I gathered she took my reply as petulant and continued to say that this was the restaurant policy and that I had to move to a table for two.

Now let me just say that this café, once a far more friendly establishment with better and cheaper food, has enjoyed being without competitors in its cove location since I can remember it being there. It had a substantial makeover to make its interior look more swanky, but since then, it somehow lost its charm. During peak times, it certainly draws in the crowds, which is good business-wise, but there is a downside. Being nonchalant to the point of being a little arrogant towards the customer. A very common attribute in a business without competition.

I asked if I could see the manager. She walked off and shortly after, she said it would be okay to sit there. Not many minutes later, my friend arrived and he went to the counter to order up some coffees. All in all, not a pleasant experience. Having to battle it out with the staff in a near-empty café asking permission to sit at a nice table. I wonder if it was worth it.

A similar experience happened to me at one of those chain restaurants, The Original Pancake Kitchen, situated on a busy road in Reynella, south of Adelaide. My son had a maths class next door, and I made the customary practice of having a coffee or a glass of wine there while waiting for the class to finish. There was no one there at all except for two staff members behind the counter. This time, there was a 'Wait to be Seated' sign and I stood there waiting for the woman behind the counter to seat me. She was behind the counter drying a couple of glasses and wiping a few surfaces. She glanced at me but didn't seem particularly keen to serve me. Pointing off to the left side against a wall lined up with tables for two, I asked politely if it's okay just to take a seat. She came out and said that I would have to sit at this particular table located just off to the right of where I was standing. It was a rather dark location near to the counter. I asked her why I had to sit at this particular table. Especially that I was the only customer there. She said that the other tables are closed. I'm not kidding.

Having been there before on prior occasions, each time of which, the entire restaurant was empty during these hours, I'd never come across this before. I said to the server that I usually sit there. Like the beach café, she said it was restaurant policy to seat customers. I wasn't much in the mood of making a fuss, so I just did what I was told.

Never went there again because during late 2022, that place closed down. I wonder why.