

ARE YOU BEING SERVED?

TALKING BUTLER BOOM WITH THE BRITISH BUTLER INSTITUTE

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Butler Nick Bonell trains his students how to serve tea the British way

Demand for the quintessentially British domestic is skyrocketing in the Middle Kingdom, with virtually every butler agency now having an office or representative in China and requests for British and British-trained staff outstripping supply. We caught up with the very proper Nicholas Bonell, Trainer and Consultant of Shanghai's newest butler school, The British Butler Institute, to find out more about the trend and challenges on the job.

So, tell us about The British Butler Institute...

The British Butler Institute (TBBI) was founded in 1997 by two principals who worked at Buckingham Palace for Princess Diana. After her very sad demise, they left the palace and set up the school. The Institute is now expanding across the world: we recently opened our doors in Lagos, Delhi and Brussels and have been testing the ground in Shanghai since April.

When did you enter the profession?

I started at a very young age at the private home of Lord and Lady Hartford in England where

father was a forester and my mother a maid. Growing up, I gained experience working with the head butler of the house and began looking after the Lord and Lady. I then received formal training in college and entered the hospitality trade working in fine dining – mainly in hotels – all around the UK. A few years ago, I decided to go back to my roots and serve at private households again.

What are the core values of a British butler?

First and foremost, one must have the highest levels of personal presentation and hygiene. Shoe care is essential, as is exceptional attention to detail and the ability for anticipation, consistency and discretion. An in-depth knowledge of international etiquette, wine, cigars, food and all types of cuisine and preparations are must-have values as well. And, of course, a full understanding of all types of service, from silver service to high tea, weddings, funerals, state banquets and birthdays.

What roles have you covered?

I have done everything from dishwashing and waitressing to chauffeuring and managing res-

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taurants. I have also been asked to look after visiting royalty, celebrities and prime ministers. Serving is in my blood.

How has the profession changed since you started?

We've had to move into the 21st century, which means mastering the use of technology. Knowing how to use an iPad and operate a smartphone are important requirements for a manservant today. The modern butler is a blend of personal assistant, driver, valet, housekeeper and event planner. It's a well-rounded job.

What does the butler training involve?

We start from personal presentation and hygiene and then

look at the core values of the British butler. Understanding the British way of service is essential to the learning process and, here in Shanghai, adapting it to Chinese culture and etiquette is a major part of the apprenticeship.

Demand for private butlers is booming around the world.

Why do you think that is?
I believe this driving demand is highly due to what I call the *Downton Abbey* effect. New money wants to emulate old money and it does so by acquiring the trappings of old money – works of art, for instance, but also butlers. It's the quasi-aristocratic allure a worldly employee can exercise that makes the idea of a high-end manservant so enticing. *Downton Abbey* has certainly played a key part in emphasizing the diverse aspects this profession covers.

And what about China? The demand for butlers is skyrocketing here...

Chinese wealthy are well-traveled and often experience high levels of service abroad. They now want that same level in their homes. At the same time, a butler can show their principals on the finer points of etiquette, as well as a range of other skills – where exactly to place the bouillon spoon, which luxury brands to buy, how to respond to an invitation to a cocktail party, what to wear. The promise of such guidance is very enticing for the new rich.

Can anyone enroll at TBBI?

Absolutely, so long as applicants show a genuine passion for the profession. This is a people industry and attitude cannot be taught. If there's no real, in-depth interest to learn, there can't be real training. Are applications open yet? Not yet. We're still laying the groundwork, but we're going to be pushing full steam ahead from this month onwards.

// For more on The British Butler Institute visit www.britishbutlerinstitute.com