



## Cameron Mitchell Restaurants, “Walking the Talk”

BY ANDI FREEMAN  
SENIOR EDITOR, *CUSTOMER FIRST*

“Great people delivering genuine hospitality”, “Raving Fans”, “Yes, is the answer—what, is the question”, “Well done”. These are just a few of the daily go-to and expected philosophies at **Cameron Mitchell Restaurants** which has grown from a modest start in 1993—with the launch of Cameron’s, an intimate, contemporary American Bistro in North Columbus, Ohio to 7 different concepts in 18 locations spread over eight states: Indiana, Michigan, Florida, Arizona, Texas, Ohio, Georgia and Colorado and a large catering business centered in Central Ohio.

### Philosophy

Several years after starting his career as a dishwasher, Cameron Mitchell sat down at his mother’s dining room table when he realized his love for the food service business. Putting pen to paper he mapped out his goals that would eventually bring him to the Presidency of his own restaurant company. But it was more

than a good business plan and initiative that launched this multi-million dollar company.

Cameron Mitchell’s role within the company models his firm’s expectations of delivering genuine hospitality in his interactions with the people he considers most important in the business—Cameron Mitchell Restaurants associates. When a CMR associate goes to Cameron Mitchell’s home for any reason; they are invited in, offered food and drink and treated as a friend. Cameron Mitchell has been recognized for the sincerity of his respectful treatment of all with whom he comes in contact by having been granted the most prestigious Silver Plate Award from the International Foodservice Manufacturers Association and was honored with the Council of Hotel and Restaurant Trainers (CHART) 2007 Commitment to People Award.

Heather Thitoff, Director of Training for CMR, has been with the company for eight years, and considers herself very lucky to be a part of such a service-

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oriented environment, and “loves where she works”. Thitoff is the newest person on her team. So clearly the positive nature of working at CMR is felt by its associates and acknowledged by their lengthy seniority. Cameron Mitchell Restaurants have led the way to excellent customer service with its **“Yes is the answer, what is the question”** motto. Their goal is to assure all **CMR associates know they are number one**. That they are empowered to fulfill every customer’s needs with no cut-off, no limits, and no preapproval. “Limiting empowerment is pennies compared to the long-term return”, says Thitoff. “A trusting environment leads to optimal empowerment.”

Cameron Mitchell Restaurants don’t just “talk the talk” but have found a variety of inventive ways to “walk it” as well. One day, Mitchell and his son were customers at another restaurant and his son wanted a milkshake. The wait staff member quickly pointed out that milkshakes were not a menu item. Mitchell then



CMR Vice President of Marketing, Heather Leonard with Zach Montgomery, General Manager at the Ocean Prime (Denver, CO). Outstanding teamwork and customer service focus has helped pave the way for CMR to receive several very prestigious awards.

countered with the fact that they had a blender, milk and ice cream and could easily make a milkshake. Mitchell was shocked when the wait staff member responded to the request with “it’ll cost you”. Mitchell walked away from that experience making it a mission that CMR associates never say, “no” or “it’ll cost you” in any fashion. CMR began the “Milkshake” pins and “Milkshake” awards, encouraging associates to say “yes” and celebrating them every time they do.

Thitoff delights in reporting that regardless of the job function associates perform at CMR, everyone’s role is critical. CMR administration makes sure all associates know that the most important customer group is them. For instance, if a part-time wait staff associate is interested in marketing, CMR finds a way to capitalize on that both for the associate and for CMR. They support the associate in using their marketing skills to learn more about that field while promoting CMR overall. A “Win-Win”.

**“Raving Fans”** is CMR’s constant goal with five groups of customers: Associates (always first), guests, community (consider their restaurants an integral part of each community in which they reside), purveyors (vendors) and partners (investors).

Every associate working at Cameron Mitchell Restaurants has the opportunity to serve a customer both internally and/or externally and are acknowledged and supported in doing so. When a vendor comes to deliver a product, they are not restricted to “off-times”, i.e., before 10:30 a.m. or after 2:00 p.m. CMR philosophy and practice is that if the delivery time is good for the vendor, it is good for CMR. The vendor is welcomed into the location, offered food and drink and considered a partner with the business. **“Walking the talk.”**

### **Excellent service above all!**

Associates at Cameron Mitchell Restaurants are encouraged to be proactive. In fact, being proactive is one of the expectations. As an example, associates are encouraged to **celebrate anything** with the guests. Birthdays, anniversaries, night-out without the kids and even sending a dessert home for the babysitter free of charge. If the associate doesn’t know for sure

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that it is a special occasion, they are encouraged to create one and celebrate it with the guest.

To show guests how much they do appreciate their continued business, CMR has established a “guest preference system” where the personal preferences per guest are noted, i.e., their preferred wine or dessert or a gluten-free diet, etc. to better please the guest. This makes the guest feel special every time they visit the restaurant, and doesn’t make them feel badly for asking for something out of the ordinary. Their preferences are noted and proactively suggested at every visit.

Cameron Mitchell Restaurants take an opposite approach to the basic dining experience seen in many other restaurants. If a guest comments to the host or hostess as they are leaving a Cameron Mitchell Restaurant that they had a “good” experience, the guest is not charged for that visit. **“Good” is never good enough.** CMR continues to empower their associates to fulfill the guests every need continually striving to acquire and retain **“Raving Fans”**.

Cameron Mitchell, himself, is based out of the home office in Columbus, OH, traveling every quarter to each CMR location spread over eight states. He spends time with the associates to find out how things are going in their restaurant and how things could be improved. “When associates are treated as if they matter, they will pass that same treatment to guests and other associates they connect with”, says Thitoff. Again, a **Win-Win**.



Cameron Mitchell Restaurants are warm and inviting as shown with the Ocean Prime Restaurant, Atlanta, Georgia



Mark Sobotkowski from Mitchell's Ocean Club (Columbus, Ohio), Rodrigo Cabral and Rudi Dos Santos from Ocean Prime (Atlanta, Georgia) deliver genuine hospitality to the restaurant’s guests.

To maintain the high service expectations, and standards, associates are anonymously surveyed annually on their satisfaction with their restaurant, leadership, cleanliness, etc. Nothing is out-of-bounds for assessing. The home office including Cameron Mitchell himself participates in the surveying process as well. Results are shared with associates and action plans developed with their input and support. **“Walking the talk”** that the associates are the number one customer at CMR.

### Challenges

CMR has approximately 2,000 associates throughout its eight-state locations and so, of course, face hurdles in achieving and maintaining a culture of excellent customer service to every customer, every day, and every location. The consistency of that culture is the top priority. Cameron Mitchell Restaurants is known for growing their talent from within and can rightfully brag about very low turnover, as well as the number of managers who have been promoted up the ranks. Thitoff states that the best way to ensure the expected culture is both well-known and comfortable to Leadership, is to grow the Leadership from within. That plan is obviously working at CMR.

It can also be a challenge to convince new associates to allow themselves to be treated well—to actually be the most important customer at CMR—to be truly empowered and supported to say “yes” at every

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opportunity. “Once they have adapted to this sometimes new concept and find they can trust that it will continue, the associates pass this service level onto the guests, realizing that with exemplary service comes a loyal guest” per Thitoff.

In addition to associate satisfaction surveys, Cameron Mitchell Restaurants routinely review “open table” ratings and “trip advisor” on-line as well as emails from guests to gauge how they are doing and how they can improve. They are constantly learning how to listen more closely to customers so they can continue to meet and exceed the highest of customer standards and expectations.

If you are looking for a dining experience from a company that not only takes extreme pride in the quality of food they serve, but also goes to the utmost lengths to show the customer they are appreciated, visit any of the following restaurants and you will become a life-long guest. ■

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Andi Freeman *is an NCSA Editor.*

- ***Cameron’s American Bistro*** (Columbus, OH)  
Cap City Fine Diner and Bar (Gahanna, OH & Grandview Heights, OH)
- ***Marcella’s*** (Columbus, OH)
- ***M*** (Columbus, OH)
- ***Martini*** (Columbus, OH)
- ***Mitchell’s Ocean Club*** (Columbus, OH)
- ***Ocean Prime*** (Atlanta, GA, Dallas, TX, Denver, CO, Troy, MI, Orlando, FL, Phoenix, AZ, Tampa, FL, Opening Soon: Indianapolis, IN, & Houston, TX)
- ***Molly Woo’s*** (Columbus, OH)
- ***The Pearl*** (Opening Fall 2012 – Short North Arts District, Columbus, OH)
- ***The Rusty Bucket Tavern and Restaurant*** ([www.MyRustyBucket.com](http://www.MyRustyBucket.com) to visit any of their 12 locations in: OH, IN, MI)
- ***Cameron Mitchell Catering*** (Columbus, OH)

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For Information and directions to any of the Cameron Mitchell Restaurants, please visit [www.CameronMitchell.com](http://www.CameronMitchell.com).