

YOU'VE BEEN SERVED



The world-class maitre d' and star of TV's *First Dates*, Fred Sirieix, lifts the lid on the silver-tongued tricks of his trade — while he works his magic on *Francesca Angelini*

Portrait by David Yeo

It's not hard to be taken in by Fred Sirieix. Fans of *First Dates* will know him as the smooth-talking French maitre d' who makes love happen. Dressed in sharp blue suits, he dispenses dating advice that is often enigmatic, always wise. A charming cupid, if you like. His day job, however, is as general manager at Galvin at Windows, a serious French restaurant overlooking Hyde Park in London.

In restaurants such as this, the general manager is the most important person in the room. Deep-pocketed guests come for hospitality, they expect to be made to feel significant, to be cared for like sheikhs. The *côte de boeuf* is secondary.

And doesn't Sirieix know it. A beguiling mix of confidence and deference, he listens intently, never interrupts. Each guest leaves with the impression that they have a unique rapport with him. He has his means: he'll hold back tables each night so those with his phone number always have a seat; he develops intimate "codes" with guests, so when a Middle Eastern regular who doesn't drink in public asks for "his tea", Sirieix knows to bring a pot of vodka.

He is one of the best maitre d's in the world. Bewitching customers is his life's purpose. And in a new book, *Secret Service*, he dissects the tricks of the industry. For a man who embodies discretion, his book is surprisingly candid, peppered with juicy anecdotes. Over an espresso, I tell him I love the story of the couple who disappear beneath the tablecloth for a quickie. And the one about a Premier League footballer, who hops off to a cubicle with his date for 15 minutes, then, a week later, brazenly returns to Galvin at Windows with his wife. "He pleaded a big shush with his eyes when he came back," Sirieix laughs. "I find it hilarious. I suppose it's the thrill, though I've never done anything like it."

Part of his way of putting you at ease is never to pass judgment. Russian rudery, which includes a fighty man who squared up to him "like a snake" after Sirieix gently suggested he leave, is forgiven as cultural difference. A regular who every day requests sliced banana to go with his £400 Château d'Yquem isn't weird, but normal.

Sirieix has, I discover, as many mantras and metaphors for service as he does for dating. He is the "general" of a "battlefield", the "football manager training Manchester United". When he surveys the restaurant, he sees "a matrix of numbers, a multi-layered steel trap", where most people, including me, see a logistical nightmare. The weighty and elegant reception is "guarded" by his "gazelles on Red Bull". Why the moniker? "Even if a gazelle is looking to the east, it can sense a lion approaching from the north, south or west." That is, I suppose, one way of saying they're vigilant.

Once guests arrive, they are, essentially, in the hands of spies. Restaurants such as Galvin google you before you show up. Intelligence is crucial. "If you're a writer and I like your book, I can say, 'I love your books,' though it has to be done subtly," he explains. After each meal, records are made, which is how, the next time you dine, the restaurant knows to present you with a glass of your favourite vintage Bordeaux. No, it's not mind-reading.

If you're famous, a regular or just potentially difficult, "TI" will be noted beside your name: *très important*. These guests get special attention. But don't expect ever to be seated next to an actual celebrity. Sirieix can make his reservations grid do anything.

In the 25 years since he came to Britain, Sirieix has worked everywhere, from Pierre Koffmann's La Tante Claire to Le Gavroche. He's seen the industry evolve from an Orwellian world where it was acceptable for the head waiter to give staff sharp kick if he felt like it, to a wholesome environment that offers a proper career. He lives in south London with his two children and recently split from his partner of 12 years. He is in a new relationship, but won't be drawn on this, partly, I suspect, because it doesn't fit with his Cupid role.

He lives by the cliché that the customer is king or queen. "You've got to love them — they are all paying for your Christmas and mortgage. They are not here to give, they're here to take," he says as he retrieves my coat. "Oooh, it's lovely." In the lift I realise, again, I've been had. Of course he doesn't really like my battered jacket ■

YOU CANNOT BE SIRIEIX

"I see so many people having a meal together where they're both on their phones. I think phones will follow the trajectory of cigarettes and come with a health warning. People are as addicted to their phones as they are to cigarettes. For a long time, even doctors encouraged us to smoke. Sometimes I give couples free champagne if they leave their phones at reception for their entire meal"



VIDEO EXTRA

For Fred's advice on how to impress a dinner date, visit thesundaytimes.co.uk/magazine

Secret Service: *Lifting the Lid on the Restaurant World* is published on October 19 (Quadrille £17)