Case Study: The Criterion Hotel

Financed by family connections, Lyn and Russell Fitzgerald have purchased the lease of The Criterion Hotel in Wup Wup, Gippsland. Both in their early 40’s, they have had several years’ experience in the hospitality industry between them – Lyn as catering manager of an exclusive private hospital, and Russell as the manager of a backpacker hostel in St Kilda. They also have worked in a variety of clubs and city hotels.

They bought into the business because of its potential. Wup Wup is located on the main highway connecting Melbourne to the tourist destination of Phillip Island. It is a small town, servicing the local rural area. Built in the late 1800’s, the Criterion Hotel is the only pub for miles, and is a focal point for the local community. Lyn and Russell are newcomers to Wup Wup, but most of the staff are from the local district.

There are four main parts to the business – the bar, the dining room, the bottle shop, and accommodation. Lyn and Russell aim to increase business in the bar and dining room by attracting the passing international tourist trade. They have installed an espresso machine, changed the menu to reflect local produce ‘with an international taste’, and all bar and waiting staff have been issued with modern, new uniforms. The dining room is now called “La Bistro”. They also want the bottle shop to increase sales, as a drive through service has just been opened.

The Criterion Hotel has a relaxed family atmosphere amongst the employees (indeed, some are related to each other). Unemployment is very high in the region, so staff generally feel lucky to have a local job. There are 12 full time employees, and extra casual staff are used for busier Friday and Saturday nights. As licensee owners, Lyn and Russell work between the split shifts whenever and wherever they are needed.

Last month there was a serious problem. The business lost potential customers, causing tension and bad feelings between the owners and staff. Employee morale is affecting productivity. There were a number of incidents which contributed to the Saturday crisis. Accommodation at the hotel was bulging at the seams due to the Wup Wup High School reunion, and three bedrooms had been inadvertently double booked – the receptionist had stepped out of the office for a break and Peter the barman had taken the booking manually over the phone. Also, some of the guests complained that their rooms had not been serviced properly.

The San Remo Fishermen’s Club was having its annual crayfish banquet in La Bistro. In addition, Lyn had arranged for a bus of Japanese tourists to stop in for an early dinner on their way to see
the fairy penguins at Phillip Island; plus, the Wup Wup Football Club had scheduled their pre-
season fundraiser dinner for that date. It was going to be a busy night in the dining room.

The new staff uniforms had been delivered, and there were grumbles about looking like religious
cult members. It was generally felt by the staff that only a person as thin as a greyhound and as
tall as a giraffe would look any good with the cut of the style (designed by Lyn, without any staff
input or consultation).

The receptionist had overheard Russell talking on the phone to Employment National, saying that
they were wanting someone young and energetic, who was good with money and customer
oriented, and who could handle food as well as bar work. She passed this information on to her
cousin Peter the barman. He told his wife – one of the waiting staff, and his nephew, who worked
in the bottle shop. Staff members felt their jobs were under threat.

In the bar, a fight broke out between the asparagus pickers from Koo Wee Rup, and the
rouseabouts who were in town setting up for the Lang Lang Rodeo down the highway. The brawl
spilled out into the car park, and in the general excitement someone cleaned out the cash register
and took a case of Bundaberg Rum from the unattended bottle shop.

Dinner was a disaster. Competent in catering for 60 settings, the kitchen didn’t have the correct
ingredients available for the new menu. The new menu had been designed by Russell who
dismissed any suggestions made by Chef Brendan as ‘too country bumpkin’. With the extra
number of diners, the overloaded oven took twice as long to heat the apricot stuffed chicken
breasts; the kitchen hand Denise overcooked the crayfish; and there weren’t enough plates
because Roger the dishwasher had failed to turn up for work. The Japanese tourist guides
complained that they weren’t ‘Greeted & Seated’, that the staff member (Lilian) just talked to the
bus driver; the menu on a blackboard was written only in English; the meal was late and the
waiting staff were rude. Furthermore the toilet facilities weren’t properly cleaned.

Lyn and Russell were angry at the way things just fell apart; people didn’t seem to take
responsibility for their jobs. When they first took over the hotel they had planned to get all the staff
together for a meeting, but it would have cost them too much in wages. Instead they were going to
speak to everyone individually, but what with all the work they were doing they hadn’t got around to
it. “It is just so hard to get good staff” they said, in unison.
Staff profiles

Front of house, accommodation & cleaning

Office / Reception: Lilian (30)
Left school at 17, worked for a while in the local pharmacy then married and had three children. Now the children are all at school she has returned to the paid workforce. Lilian operates the switchboard, takes bookings, greets and registers guests and makes up their accounts. Lyn and Russell want her to Greet & Seat the bus tour groups, and to computerise the office by using MYOB. Lilian knows how to type, but hasn’t ever used a computer - she is interested in the computer studies her kids are doing at school. She got this job through her cousin the barman.

Housemaid: Sue (22)
An RMIT Management student who has deferred from the course – Sue had to come back to Wup Wup to look after her invalid mother. This was the only job she could find in the area. She is a people person, with an extraverted social manner. Sue likes talking to the guests and tends to get behind with her work. Her job is to change all the linen, make beds, clean the bathrooms and toilets, vacuum the carpet in the bedrooms and upstairs hallway, and dust and polish every possible surface. She has to do all the housework at home, and jokes that she might as well apply for a degree in housework.

Cleaner: Bob (63)
Bob used to work for the shire council where he managed the Functions Hall for over 15 years. He is very popular, a friend to anyone in town who has ever been in difficulty. When he was made redundant he found it very hard to find work, and had a casual job for a while as a car detailer. (At that time it was Anna’s wages that kept them financially above water.) Bob works from 5.00 to 10.00 a.m. cleaning the bar, lounge, bistro, and the toilets on the ground floor. He vacuums and spot cleans the carpets, and – using a scrubbing machine – washes then polishes the hard floors. Bob is meticulous, very careful and thorough, (unlike the previous Cleaner) and takes a lot of time to get through his workload. Sometimes he is still cleaning when the customers arrive. It isn’t part of his job, but Bob also picks up litter from the car park and seems to be the only person who can get the old boiler working for the hot water service. Bob takes pride in his work.

Hotel useful: Hawksy (age unknown)
Every country pub has a Useful – Hawksy won’t reveal his age to anyone, but he does go on about the war when he was dodging bullets in New Guinea, or was it in Africa. He cleans the ashtrays, collects empty glasses and takes them to the bar and keeps the pool table tidy for Peter, chalking the cues before racking them in height order. He sets up the chairs and trestle tables for the big social nights, and washes the publicans’ cars. Lodging and meals are deducted from his minimum wage, but his war service pension enables him to bet big at the horse races. Sometimes he wins, and will disappear for exactly two weeks, before coming back to The Criterion. It is a mystery where he goes.

Kitchen & food service

Chef: Brendan (35)
A trade qualified chef, Brendan has worked in Melbourne at top restaurants, but experienced an occupational burnout at Browns Palace Bistro. He came to the country hotel for lifestyle reasons, and to spend more time with his family. Brendan and the kitchen staff have been successfully catering for 60 guests at a time, and the hotel dining room is a popular eating place for locals. Apart from supervising the kitchen staff, Brendan organises the food orders and controls the storeroom with a practised eye - a manual stock take at a glance. He knows that Lyn and Russell have industry experience, but thinks that they don’t yet understand local tastes and expectations and thinks the debacle with the new menu demonstrates this.

Kitchen hand: Denise (19)
Has been working part time for the past year, and wants experience in the kitchen so she can do a cooking apprenticeship. Now working full time, Denise has been responsible for doing all the salads and entrees. She always arrives early to set up the kitchen and get the ingredients ready for the next meal service, and is very reliable. Denise usually covers for Roger on paydays.

Kitchen hand: Roger (50)
Has been with the hotel for several years, and is like part of the furniture. Roger is a quiet character who just likes to be left alone to do his work, but he has a habit of swearing and talking to himself, which some people
find disconcerting. He operates the dishwashing machine, empties the bins, cleans the kitchen equipment and floor, and keeps the yard tidy. Because of his alcohol problem, on paydays Roger doesn’t turn up for work.

Waiting staff:
All waiting staff work split shift, 11.00am – 3.00 p.m. and 6.00 p.m. to 10.30 p.m. They fold napkins & set tables, prepare lemon garnishes, fill salt & pepper shakers and write up the menu specials blackboard. During service they take food and drink orders from customers, call the orders to the kitchen and bar, pick the items up and serve the customers. They also clear the tables, scrape and stack the plates for the dishwasher and make the coffees.

Anna (40)
Is married to Bob the cleaner. Anna has been working at the hotel for nearly 10 years and knows every local customer by name. She is cheerful and efficient, but has never done any formal training in food service. A little on the plump side, Anna is very unhappy with the uniform that has been foisted on the waiting staff.

Greta (25)
Related to Peter the barman, Greta worked in an office the city, then moved to Wup Wup when she married Mick, the bottle shop attendant. Although pleasant natured, Greta is very shy and doesn’t converse easily with the customers, she just does her job and leaves them alone as much as possible. Greta thinks the new uniform emphasises her height and makes her look really professional.

Sue (32)
Has had experience working in a number of country pubs. Sue enjoys working with people, but can be a bit bossy and isn’t very popular with the other staff. She is currently having family problems which is draining her energy and affecting her work – she has always been punctual and reliable, but recently has started coming in late and leaving early. Sue thinks the uniforms are pretentious and out of place in a country hotel.

Bar & liquor sales

Bar staff:
There is one permanent bar attendant and he works a split shift from 10.00am to 3.00pm and 5.30 to 10.30pm The rest are casuals who come in on Friday and Saturday nights when the hotel is really busy. All casuals serve beers, wines & cocktails (not often), operate the cash register and the glass washer machine. Now they are supposed to be serving cappuccino and latte coffees, but no one knows how the machine works – yet. The old cash register has recently been replaced. Again, no one is really confident using the new register – sure, they can ring up the sales, but apparently it is a very smart computer which can give a lot of information if you can work it out.

Bar attendant: Peter (57)
Peter is the longest serving employee at the hotel, and was instrumental in obtaining work for his nephew Mick who works in the bottle shop. Apart from general bar service, Peter looks after the cellar – hooking up kegs, cleaning the lines, and making sure the gas is working. He manually checks that stock and stores are up to level, cleans the bar and prepares for service. Peter knows every one in the district. He runs the footy tipping contest, sets up the Sky Channel TV, looks after the pool table – making sure it is clean and the cues are racked – and liaises with the local darts and footy clubs who buy kegs for their club nights. Peter’s health is not as good as it was, his knees are stiffening up and causing him a lot of pain. The cold cellar work aggravates the pain, and he does a lot of walking in a day’s work as the cash register is at the end of the long bar. He has refused to wear the new uniform.

Bottle shop attendant: Mick (25)
Mick works full time in the bottle shop, from 10.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. Monday to Friday. He is very involved in the local football team and got the bottle shop job through his uncle Peter the barman. The previous owners were very sympathetic when he broke his ankle at training, and he was able to sit at the cash register while extra casual staff did the rest of the heavy work. Mick opens up the bottle shop, checks his money float for the till, fills the shelves & refrigerators and sells beer, wine, spirits to customers. With the new drive through he can’t talk as much as he used to with the locals. Mick worked out the bottle shop’s new cash register very quickly, he has a knack with computers.