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## THE TIPPING DEBATE

By Teresa Taylor

Were some of the public offsites in rushing to judgment? When New Orleans Saints

quarterback Drew Brees was outed recently for

leaving a \$3 tip on a \$74 restaurant bill, the reaction from detractors was immediate and indignant. “Cheap” read the initial blog post. But Brees, and his defenders, pointed out that the tip was on a takeout order, not table service.

Part of the uncertainty lies in the economics: In South Carolina, restaurant and other service workers whose income is based on tips earn only \$2.13 an hour in wages. But everyone else, including the sandwich makers behind the counter and the cashiers, make the minimum wage, \$7.25 an hour, or higher.

Interestingly, five Southern states – South Carolina along with Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee – have no state minimum wage laws whatsoever. Employers still must comply with the federal minimum rate. For tipped employees, the rate was set at \$2.13 in 1991 and has been frozen there since.

At takeout counters, those ubiquitous tip jars usually represent pooled money that is shared among workers who don’t normally get tips.

So right or wrong, if you don’t drop money into the tip jar, you’ve got plenty of company. At 3 p.m. last Thursday, well after the lunchtime peak, a glass carafe on the counter at Dave’s Carry-Out at Coming and Morris streets held a whopping \$1.70.

Owner and cook Sandra McCray shrugged it off as she lifted a crispy piece of whiting from a frying basket and placed it in a foam container.



“Really it doesn’t matter as long as you come in and get my food,” she says. Tourists are more likely tippers than locals, she observes.

McCray herself, typical of those working in the food and beverage business, says she always leaves a tip, regardless of the type of establishment.

“Even if I go to S&S Cafeteria, I tip. Some of these people aren’t making a lot of money.” There appeared to be a lot more money in the tip jar, a modified gas can, down the street at Moe’s Southwest Grill, a counter-service eatery on the corner of King and Calhoun.

Yet staffers estimate that only about one in four people give a tip, and it’s usually the pocket change left after paying the bill.

Customers Alina Bamberger and Cullen Wilkerson, both 19-year-old College of Charleston students, say they tend to feed the tip jar, even though they are serving themselves. Mostly they give change but more at times.

“If they are especially nice and interesting, I’ll give like \$2,” says Bamberger, who has worked in food and beverage. If paying by credit card, she might also give more “because I can write it in.”

Most diners know the standard for a sit-down, full-service meal: 15 percent to 20 percent. But the rules become less clear when picking up food to go or at a place where you order at the counter and pull the handle on the drink machine.

“For people depending on tips, it’s not a tipping jar,” says **Cindy Grosso**, founder of Charleston School of Protocol and Etiquette. “There’s no obligation on a tipping jar.” Still, it may be a way to compliment a job well done, she says. “If you go to that place all the time, if you are a regular, or maybe the person went out of their way to help you, then yes.”

Steve Carroll, operator of Red’s Ice House restaurants and president of the board of the Charleston Restaurant Association, agrees.

“I think it’s totally up to the person. I think one thing people always should remember, tipping is an option ... We’ve always appreciated our tips but didn’t expect them and we’re always pleasantly surprised.”

He, too, tips on takeout orders but usually not 20 percent. “It depends on who I’m dealing with,” he says.



In a self-service situation, creating extra work for the staff may factor in his decision. "I tip at CiCi's (a pizza buffet), when all my kids are there eating and somebody cleans up after us when we've made a mess. Tip where you feel it's appropriate."

Friends Allison Lester, 26, of Mount Pleasant and Nicolas Kokocin, 25, of Savannah were leaving Dell'z Deli on Cannon Street last week after picking up a late lunch. Both admit to not being a regular tippers on takeout food, but there are exceptions.

For her, a tip is warranted if someone is particularly welcoming. For him, it seems more impulsive. "I left 15 percent (today). It's just because the girl is pretty," he jokes. Asked about tipping at Dell'z versus a fast-food chain, Lester says she considers more than just service. "Because it's a local business and it takes more time to make the food," she says. A tip is a way of telling them she likes the food and the quality as opposed to pure service.

Owner Dell Grayson says she doesn't get mad at those who don't tip, but in her experience, most do; 60 to 70 percent leave something.

"It's up to them," Grayson says as she keeps pace with the steady traffic of 20-somethings placing and picking up orders in the cramped space. "You can't tell people they're bad if they don't tip."

The size of the order also doesn't make much of a difference, at least most of the time. A customer who orders 20 sandwiches in the middle of the lunch and doesn't leave a tip, well ... "That's just rude," she says.

Food and beverage people are the most generous, she says, sometimes leaving as much as \$3 or \$4. Most others drop a dollar or less into the fixture "Feelin' Tipsy" jar. Then there are the gray areas, such as the Butcher & Bee on upper King Street. The trendy lunch and late night spot is "half full service, and half no service," says owner Michael Shemtov.

That means all the ordering is done at the counter and payment is taken at the same time. Staff delivers food plates to the table and clears them as well. But diners are in charge of getting their own drinks and silverware.

Shemtov says he doesn't put out a tip jar for a couple of reasons and doesn't encourage or solicit tips in any way.



“My thought is, all you’ve done at that point is give your order and your money. It’s presumptuous” to ask for tips up front before eating, he says.

Nevertheless, people do leave tips on the table and on the counter. They amount to 2 percent as a percentage of sales, Shemtov says, adding that he pays everybody an hourly wage close to or more than \$10 an hour.

Shemtov is a “chronic overtipper,” says his wife, Melody, noting the irony. But he has other reasons for shunning tipping. “I wanted to stand out.”

Shemtov also has a defense for his sandwiches which are priced a little higher than average: Subtract what you might leave for a tip and the prices are in line with the competition.

Jordan Sweeney, 23, of West Ashley is adamantly “pro-tipping” for takeout. The Taco Spot worker says she and her fellow employees make at least the minimum wage, but she is sympathetic to kindred souls in the restaurant industry. “You’re still doing a lot of prep work. You’re providing the courtesy of trying to be helpful. You’re providing suggestions.”

But, “I definitely don’t expect a whopping tip.”

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