

# A TALE OF TWO RESTAURANTS: A LESSON FOR VETERINARY MEDICINE

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*"People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel" – Maya Angelou*

**T**he restaurant was reportedly the BEST seafood restaurant on the entire island, and after the third person recommended it, we started paying attention. It was August 2022, and my husband, Rob, our pup, Eddie, and I were cycling across Newfoundland. After braving the bugs, eating boil-in-the-bag meals night after night, and climbing hill after hill, each larger than the last, we were more than ready for the BEST restaurant in all of Newfoundland. We rolled up to a quaint heritage building with large windows to take advantage of the view, and my mouth started watering. A reservation was required, so we made one for the following night.

We peddled off, wondering what we would eat in the meantime. The tiny fishing village of 500 residents had only one other eatery, a little café attached to the town's gas station with a total of six tables. My expectations were low, but my legs were tired and my stomach was empty. As we walked through the door, we were greeted by a delightful server who shouted, "Seat yourselves anywheres yous can find, my loves!" We grabbed the only empty table and had a look around. No tourists here, but rather local folks out for a simple meal. Our neighbouring diners smiled at us, and a man at the table next to us asked where we had "blown in from." Laughter ensued. The hospitality Newfoundland is known for was in full force. Our jolly server returned, and I decided to order the Shipwreck. She raised one eyebrow, squinted at me, and said, "I am supposing you find yourself gut-founded after your big ride?" Roughly translated, that meant "Woman, you must be some hungry because that is a big meal!" Seeing my hesitation, she leaned in with a twinkle in her eye. In a conspiratorial whisper, she said, "Oh, do it! Have yourself the 'wreck.'" When she returned with our order, she took care to approach me from behind to reach around and plunk down my plate with a flourish. It was the biggest platter of food I have ever seen. Fries, turkey, dressing, cranberry sauce, and cheese curds, all smothered in an ocean of gravy. A "wreck" is the Newfie version of poutine, and it was delicious! On seeing my reaction, the entire restaurant erupted in laughter. By evening's end, we found ourselves singing "Happy Birthday" to a fellow diner and sharing the homemade cake they had brought along for the occasion. It was one of those unexpected and unforgettable travel experiences where instead of observing the culture from the outside, you feel a part of it.

With full bellies and full hearts, we fell asleep to the sound of rain on our tent roof while wondering what magic awaited us at the BEST seafood restaurant in all of Newfoundland. We awoke to sunshine exploding through the clouds. It was a perfect day to explore the town while waiting for our dinner reservation. Arriving at the restaurant with great expectations, we were met by an efficient hostess who quickly took us to our table. When we asked if we could sit at one of the empty tables with an ocean view, her answer was a firm no. Interestingly, these tables remained empty throughout the evening. I glanced around to discover hockey legend Mark Messier seated at a table nearby. My expectations rose even higher. Our server arrived, filled our water glasses, and in a very formal manner, without making eye contact, informed us she would

return shortly with the "announcements." It turned out the "announcements" were a formal reading of the dinner options. They were delivered efficiently but with little enthusiasm or interest in interacting with us. We could hear laughter emerge from the kitchen each time the wait staff pushed through its door, but the restaurant itself remained cloaked in a cool formality. The Newfie fun and hospitality remained relegated to the kitchen staff. The view was lovely, the food was fine, and while our stomachs were full, we left feeling a little empty.

Reflecting on the above experiences offers important insights for anyone who works in a service industry. While veterinary medicine is many things to many stakeholders, at its core it is and always will be a service industry. We provide a service. If customers need our service, they will walk through our doors. Whether they return or not depends on their experience. Had I spent a third night in this little coastal community, can you guess which restaurant I would have returned to?

Our success in veterinary medicine depends on more than having a great location, a beautiful facility, high-tech equipment, or highly skilled team members. As a service industry, how we make people feel matters, and I would argue it matters THE MOST. Does a visit to our hospital provide a skillful diagnosis and a treatment plan, or does it offer a skillful diagnosis, a treatment plan, AND a feeling of being cared for and truly seen?

Those two restaurants had very different cultures. Cultures I felt as much as I experienced. If you think the culture of your practice has no impact on your client and patient experience, I invite you to think again. Take an honest look at what it would feel like to be a client at your hospital. Would you feel like a respected partner in your animal's care? Does the team listen to you to understand your perspective? Do they make you feel valued and appreciated? And perhaps most important, would you return to your hospital?

The current reality of high demand for veterinary services in the face of workforce shortages can cause us to lose sight of the fact that veterinary medicine is and always will be a service profession. How we make people feel matters. It matters to our clients, our patients, and the people on our teams. It makes a difference to our financial bottom line as well as our well-being bottom line. I have a hunch that finding our way back to "being in service" may also help us find our way back to joy. Reconnecting with why we do what we do is a powerful place to start as we reimagine what the future of veterinary medicine might look like. [WCV](#)