



# REARVIEW

By Shelley Wood

# Dress code

Employer demands can say a lot about a business, and the progress of equality in the workplace

“I like your hair,” my friend told our harried waitress, who could have smoothed a fast hand over her artful up-do, mumbled a thank you, then dashed away with our drink order. Instead she made a face and cast a quick glance at the phalanx of suits with name tags loitering near the bar. “Oh thanks,” she murmured. “But it’s going to get me in trouble with my boss.”

We leaned in, hooked, conspiratorial.

“Why?”

She plucked at her spaghetti strap. “We’re not allowed to wear our hair up. It needs to be long and, you know,” she bit her glossy lip, “down.”

Down? My girlfriends and I looked at one another, then glanced around. Sure enough: punching in orders, sashaying between tables in short skirts and skimpy tops, not one server had short hair and nary a ponytail among them.

Clearly we’re getting on, my friends and I. We must be. To even bat an eye at the news that hairstyles can get you in hot water or to raise an eyebrow at skirt-length dates us, as if we’d cooed over her friendship bracelet.

*This?* I was thinking. *This again?* Somehow, by getting older and selecting a career chosen more or less equally by men and women wearing similar garb and earning roughly comparable salaries, I’d assumed this battle had already been fought and won. Silly me. For all the ways in which certain workplace barriers have been trampled over the last few decades, some walls are still standing, particularly when it comes to appearances in service jobs. Men are subject to their own set of stereotypes and expectations, but women more so. Even those who think of firemen as eye-candy wouldn’t expect them to rush into a burning building looking like they’ve stepped out of the Sizzling Firefighters fundraising calendar. We want

them in safety gear and suitable shoes. So why do certain restaurants still expect their female servers to dress as if there’s more on the menu than steaks and flat bread?

When I waitressed in my teens and 20s, appearance mattered, but to the best of my recollection, my blouse only got me in trouble if it was rumpled or had food stains, not if the neckline was too modest. And the rule was to wear hair up, not loose where it might drift too close to whatever I was serving.

Working as a waitress is a rite of passage for many young women. So, too, I realize, is the time honoured right of older women to cluck disapprovingly over the wardrobe choices of younger generations. And of course, many of the high-heeled, high-gloss women busting it in the restaurant that summer evening were working to pay their university tuition or other professional training programs. A coveted high-tips job in a busy restaurant is one of the best ways to do so.

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The fact is, some waitressing gigs are better than others. In the Okanagan, a handful of restaurants and shops require a certain look for their female staff, one that matters more than the quality of the service itself. And the standard is different for men and women. While our waitress teetered back to us on stilettos, a cluster of her male colleagues were hovering nearby in boxy suits, looking more like pimps-in-training than service staff, their eyes flitting over their female coworkers. Ridiculous. For many of these girls and women, this was likely one of their first real jobs and their first decent wage. And this was the required uniform.

I have five young nieces. I’d brought the eldest, now 13, to this very restaurant a few weeks earlier, her bright eyes taking in every gesture, every inch of skin, the haughty competitive glances between servers. I’ll support any woman’s right to wear whatever she wants to wear without someone else deciding what that says about her or how she should be treated. But I do know that provocative dress neither adds nor subtracts from the ability to remember an order, offer menu advice, or serve a Szechuan lettuce wrap. I hope my nieces learn to work hard and excel at their jobs so that they can save for whatever opportunities come next. In the meantime, I’ll be voting with my feet, taking them places where good service embraces diversity, and where professionalism, skill, and work ethic are valued over looks. [▶](#)