

If you really want something done in this town, call a concierge, but don't forget your ATM card



To make Scott McIntosh your best friend for the weekend, start with some cash. A twenty's nice. Fold it in half, then in half again. Slip it into your palm and keep it in place with your thumb.

Now it's a matter of timing and attitude. Walk up to the concierge desk at the downtown San Francisco Marriott, extend your hand and introduce yourself. Tell him you'll be around for the weekend and would appreciate any help he might be able to give you. The second Scott feels the bill, he'll take over and make the transfer. He'll hook you up. Want tickets to "The Producers"? Done. A table at Gary Danko's for 8 p.m. Saturday? Done. Maybe a trip to Alcatraz or a tip on how to take a walk on San Francisco's wild side? It's yours. With a smile.

Of course, it'll cost you. Like they say, concierge isn't French for "free."

"People come up and ask me how good of a concierge I am," McIntosh said. "I say, 'How much money do you have?'"

In a classic San Francisco sort of way, the city's real mafia isn't made up of guys like John Gotti. It's the city's concierge corps - the people who can get you into plays and restaurants, who can nail down anything from a ticket to the World Series to the best damn herbal wrap in Napa Valley.

All over town, businesses hungry for a taste of tourist traffic bow down at their feet. On any given night, you'll find many of the 150 or so men and women who make up the elite of the Bay Area's concierge community eating in restaurants, sitting in good seats on opening night for shows like Cirque du Soleil or "La Boheme," sampling gift baskets from local specialty food shops - even testing out herbal wraps. For free, of course.

They are the princes of the city, a tightly networked group that probably knows more than anyone else in town what's good, what's bad and who hasn't treated them right.

Even the smallest nail shop realizes the value of the

conciierge. At Lucky Nails, tucked into the third floor of an office building on Market Street, the phone rang in the middle of a busy pre-holiday spurt of clients. The conciierge at a nearby hotel wanted to come in at 3 p.m. for a manicure. "Sure. No problem," said the owner, who didn't really have a slot and also knew she'd be giving him a 30 percent discount.

What could she do?

"You can't say no. They bring business."

Depending on what sort of enterprise it is, conciierges can be counted on for anywhere from a quarter to as much as 80 percent of the night's take. So if you're in a business that might like to see a few more tourists coming through the door, well, it might pay to be nice to the conciierge.

Real nice.

McIntosh, 33, has a brash, tell-it-like-it-is style that makes the more genteel conciierge cringe. He says there is nothing even remotely like extortion going on. It's all about helping out the people who help you.

"If the owner of a salon understands that the amount of business I sent her helped her build a new deck on her house, then she can choose to express that with some sort of appreciation."

The dinners and manicures and free theater tickets are simply a matter of doing business - trying to get a taste of those tourist bucks.

"I can take my big conciierge money hose and direct it wherever I want," says McIntosh.

THE HOOKUP GUY

McIntosh, whose office is a thicket of papers and boxes and gift bags from museums and local bakeries, was a bartender at TGI Fridays. And a Deadhead. Among his friends, he has always been the hookup guy, the guy who did the negotiating. At some point, he realized he needed a job. He was at the craps table in Vegas at 4 a.m. when a friend told him about his new job as a hotel conciierge. The whole concept was new to him.

"I said you've got to be s- me. You get paid for that?"

A career was born. In November, McIntosh was named conciierge of the year at the Silver Plume Awards, a sort of Golden Globes of the business sponsored by the tourism magazine Where. McIntosh runs the crew at the 1,500-room hotel, where the vast majority of his work is simple stuff: Where are the cable cars? Can you suggest a restaurant within walking distance? Can you check to see if my plane is leaving on time?

But sometimes he scores big. During the World Series, he moved \$40,000 in tickets.

A big part of what he does is make restaurant reservations. Lots of them. And that's where much of his power comes from. Although exact numbers on how much traffic concierges drive to restaurants don't exist, Open Table, a computerized reservation system, offers a glimpse based on the 37 hotels that use the system. In October alone, 17,129 people sat in seats in Bay Area restaurants because concierges sent them there.

That's why most operations in town that rely on the tourist trade seek the favor of the concierge corps.

"They're a very powerful group," says Eleanor Bertino, a public relations woman who handles many of the city's top-flight restaurants. "Certain mediocre restaurants have stayed alive for years because of concierges."

Sometimes it's about more than getting butts in chairs. There's a relationship that develops between a good concierge and a restaurant that can benefit both. When Nick Peyton, one of the best front-of-the-house men in the business, handled things at Gary Danko, the restaurant didn't really need the concierge business. The place is a tough reservation to get. Still, Peyton always made sure he kept up relations. In part, because he understands the tough position they may be in. If a concierge called asking for a table for four on a Saturday night, it was a big deal.

"I know when Scott (McIntosh) is calling for something like that, he's got a Benjamin Franklin in his hand, and I want to work for Scott. Plus, I know if he's a big tipper with Scott, he's a probably big spender in general."

Kimpton Hotels and Restaurants, which runs Masa's, the Fifth Floor and more casual places like Kuleto's, makes sure the city's concierges sample the food at new restaurants or get invitations to check out a new chef's food. Each quarter, they invite 20 concierges to dine at any downtown restaurants at their leisure. They host gatherings of the local concierge association. And they visit. The public relations and marketing team declared it Kiss a Concierge Day last year and brought chocolate Hershey kisses and menus to the city's top hotels.

At some of the Kimpton restaurants, chefs show the love by sending an appetizer or dessert to any guest whose reservation was made through a concierge. The waiter tells the guest that, say, Jim at the Pan Pacific wanted to offer something special to start the meal. You can bet the tip that goes back to Jim will ensure that Jim will send another customer to the restaurant.

"It's really important you protect your relationship with them," says Andrew Freeman, vice president of restaurant sales and marketing for Kimpton. "From a marketing perspective, it's one of our top three programs."

The practice of entertaining concierges is not really bribery; it's the only way for the concierge to know what's going on. There's no way they can afford to eat out at every restaurant and see every show on their own. Though they are, to a person, cagey about their income,

many make less than \$18 an hour, some not much more than minimum wage. A chief concierge, who oversees several staffers, might take in \$50,000 to \$60,000. In a good year, tips might add \$10,000 or more. So to know, they've got to go. The concierge is only as good as his or her Palm Pilot, and they've got to keep their restaurant lists updated and their knowledge bank sharp. No one wants to send a hotel guest to a bad restaurant - or a closed one.

The gatekeepers at the city's cultural events are more than happy to let them in. The San Francisco Symphony, with concerts that change every week, relies heavily on concierge business. It sets up a concierge hotline that gets about 25 calls a day. Representatives visit hotels regularly. And they don't arrive empty-handed. This year, for the holidays, they delivered plush teddy bears, a holiday brochure and tickets to a show.

"We don't have an accurate way of tracking a revenue value on concierges, but these people are our ambassadors, not only to our community but for visitors. Word-of-mouth spreads like wildfire, and they are the ones who can control that," says Cindy Grzanowski, associate director of marketing.

"They are the kings and queens of customer service, and we treat them as such."

It's true that some concierges take full advantage, going out several nights a week for next to nothing. But to be fair, it's not one big party. Most limit their work-related dinners and plays and parties to maybe two a week. It is, after all, work for them. They are deciding the quality of a performance or food, recording their impressions and then passing it on to hotel guests. Like people who review restaurants or work at movie theaters or who attend the swanky parties they plan, work is work, even if it involves a free meal or show.

Says Kimpton's Freeman: "People always say, 'Well, you give them free dinners.' Yes, we do. And for some it's a perk, but for most of them - the good ones, at least - it's the job."

For many concierges, life on the front lines of a hotel desk isn't always glamorous - especially in a time when some hotels are pushing concierges into other duties, contracting out for the service or eliminating the program altogether. At the Pan Pacific, Andrea Freda found herself wrapping packages for Christmas and running through a list of mundane tasks, like making reservations for the airport shuttle.

"Nine times out of 10, what we do is the routine sort of things that make someone's life here more comfortable," she said. "We're not out wheeling and dealing. We don't have secret stashes of tickets we only hand out to people who take care of us. We're not accepting money from all sides. We basically find a way to learn the city as well as we can, whether it's tours or restaurants, whatever. Then we make suggestions to our guests. It's not all that mysterious."

Of course, favors are exchanged. With the exception of commissions paid by some transportation, tour and ticket broker outfits, there is never any outright exchanges of cash between a business and a concierge. That, according to both the Northern California Concierge Association and the international elite Les Clefs d'Or (pronounced lay clay door) concierge fraternity, would be unethical. In fact, the local concierge association rules forbid demanding things like limo rides, flowers, trips or other goodies "for any personal or professional gain."

But commissions are a "sticky area," says McIntosh. Limo companies and cabbies often complain of having to give some money to certain hotels to be able to pick up customers. At hotels that allow it, the "commish" goes back to the hotel and sometimes gets kicked down to the concierge. Sometimes it doesn't. A hotel like the Ritz-Carlton might take in as much as \$5,000 a month from commish, says McIntosh.

And of course, no one will admit to straight-out bribes - either from businesses or from hotel guests who want something, well, unorthodox.

The rules of being a good concierge state that they will do anything for you that's legal, moral and safe. At least, that's what the rules say.

"My personal spin?" says McIntosh. "Legal, moral and safe is a gray zone."

THE PIONEER

That sort of American, cowboy-style concierge - cemented in popular culture in the early 1990s when Michael J. Fox played a wheeler-dealer in "For Love or Money" - is a world away from the humble origins of the European concierge. The International Concierge Institute traces the job back to the reign of Louis XI, who in the 1400s used it to refer to officers of the royal palace guard whose job it was to protect the king in his palace.

By the 1800s, such officers became more like doorkeepers charged with making those visiting the palaces and grand hotels of Europe comfortable.

The man who brought the concept to America still practices his trade in San Francisco. Tom Wolf, 58, became the first concierge in America at the Fairmont Hotel in 1973. He's frequently mentioned as the best in the business. The Fairmont decided to set itself apart by having a sort of personal assistant to offer guests. But there were few takers in the early days, says Wolf.

"Back then, the purveyors in the city didn't know who I was. The girls at Ernie's didn't know me. No one knew what I was talking about. So I went around and knocked on a lot of doors."

Now, places like Nordstrom and health clubs have concierges. But true concierges, often identified by gold keys pinned on their lapels to prove they've gone through the rigorous testing required by the Les Clefs D'Or, are

only at hotels.

For the record, Wolf doesn't like cowboy-style concierges or the up-front tip style. "One of my guiding philosophies is to have a big heart. You have to be like a nurse. You have to be able to give of yourself even if people are maddeningly difficult to deal with," he said. "And the head has to remain the correct size. All of the sudden the mayor is calling you, and you start to think you're a big VIP. Well, you're not. It's the position, not you. You have to keep your head right sized and your heart big."

SERVICE THROUGH FRIENDSHIP

If you headed to the front desk at the Ritz and handed Robert Spinrad a \$20 up front, he'd be offended. He'd much rather you start your visit with a pre-trip letter, preferably on embossed stationery. And then you could introduce yourself when you arrive.

The tip, which of course would be graciously accepted, comes later.

Spinrad is the very picture of impeccable, and he handles his clients at the hotel in the same way. Suggest that maybe the concierges in town are really San Francisco's mafia, and he'll smile his polite, practiced smile and steer you away, gently.

"My mother always wanted me to be in theater and she got her wish," he says.

"This job is about service."

In fact, the motto of the Les Clefs D'Or, for which only about 30 concierges in the city qualify, is "service through friendship." Spinrad is one of them. For Spinrad, the real currency is the network of people and relationships he's built up. If he's going to get you anything you want, he has to know who has it.

And he's had to come up with a lot of things, from tricky reservations to lost passports. He has escorted people to the emergency room and packed for people who had a death in the family while on the road. On the morning of Sept.

11, 2001, with a hotel full of New York investment bankers, he became everything from grief counselor to carpool coordinator, sending strangers across the country in rented vehicles he secured because he knew people at the agencies.

Some of his duties have been a tad wackier. He's had to find a way to get a vitamin B-12 shot into a movie director's wife while she was on the set. He's thrown together an entire wedding in 48 hours in which the bride knew only what she wanted to wear. To do it, he tapped into the 1,700 numbers in his Casio business organizer, pulled strings to get the flowers, found a local pastor who could get them into a church and found a way to secure Postrio for the pre-wedding dinner.

Another time, he had 15 minutes to get a bouquet for a hapless guest who didn't realize he needed to have flowers for his bride. Spinrad took off to the local florist, grabbed every pink rose they had and ran up California Street, pulling off thorns and wrapping them in florists' tape and ribbon. He slammed the bouquet onto a silver tray just before the bride came down from her room. The groom looked like a hero.

He even tracked down a briefcase a guest had left on the airport sidewalk. Using the baggage claim ticket, he figured out at which gate the man had arrived. Spinrad called one of the limo drivers he knew who was at the airport,

and had him drive around until he saw it on the curb.

He never did get a tip for that one.

"We were a bit surprised," he said.

Though he will go to the ends of the earth for his guests, Spinrad will not do anything illegal. A rocker traveling with her daughter had hoped the Ritz doctor would write a bootleg prescription for tranquilizers, but she went away disappointed. Men in town looking for male escorts will not get hooked up (though he will send up a copy of the Bay Area Reporter for its personal ads).

"I did help a woman put a spell on her ex-husband," he confesses. "But we had met her ex-husband, so we were happy to help."

To be sure, Spinrad takes advantage of his position to live what he calls "a nice lifestyle." People take care of him in restaurants. He sees whatever shows he wants. He's out about three nights a week to stay current. He visits Ritz resorts all over the world, traveling every three months or so.

And somehow, even as you look at the shiny cuff-links he got from a guest and listen to his description of the latest play, you almost believe him when he says it's not about the lifestyle or the money or the perks.

"The most important thing for me is to make it a difference between a visit and a moving experience," he said.

"I'd rather have a note of thanks. That means so much more."

Still, if someone slips him a Franklin, well, thank you very much.

Just don't fold it up and hand it to him up front. A discreet envelope at the end of your visit will be just fine.

Do you want to be a concierge? Here are some sample questions on the test you'd have to pass to become certified by Les Clefs D'Or, USA:

1. A guest must get a piece of jewelry from San Francisco

to New York on the same day. What are your options?

2. List the required postage for a letter from the United States to Europe.

3. Describe the term "en route."

4. What is the difference between Park Hyatt and Hyatt Regency?

5. A guest is traveling to Sweden with a small dog and wants you to find out what is needed for the trip. What information and what source do you use?

6. A restaurant in your city is offering a Cartier watch to the first concierge who books 30 tables. Is this an attractive incentive to you?

THE 411 ON CONCIERGES

So you want to use a concierge. Well, why not? A good one can help you find just the right restaurant, design city tours or save your bacon if you've forgotten the bridesmaid's dress or get sick on the road.

Here are some guidelines on how to use the service and how to tip, offered by several San Francisco concierges:

Know what you want. When a concierge asks what sort of restaurant you're interested in, don't say, "Something good." It's like fingernails on a blackboard. Know your general price range, style of cooking and how much walking you want to do. The same goes for tours. Don't simply walk up and say, "So what's to do in this town, anyway?"

Send a letter or call before you arrive if you want the concierge to make several sets of reservations or if you will need some special services. And make sure you introduce yourself once you check in.

Have proper expectations. Concierges -aren't miracle workers. They probably -can't get you into the French Laundry this weekend, but they might be able to get you well-placed on the waiting list. They probably can find tickets to a sold-out show, but it could cost hundreds above face value.

Have a relationship. If you have a special request or you really, really want that 8 p.m. reservation, make sure you explain your circumstances to the concierge. -Don't just walk up and demand something. Most will go out of their way if you have a good story. "Sell it a little bit," says one.

About tipping: The bottom line is that the service is free. That means if you walk up and ask directions or get a simple restaurant or entertainment recommendation, you -don't have to tip. In fact, you never need to tip.

However, if the concierge makes a reservation or sets up a tour or secures tickets, then tip. A minimum tip begins at \$5. If it's something more difficult - reservations for

Saturday night at 8 p.m. at a great restaurant, or hard-to-get tickets - up the tip. If they do something personal, bump it up again.

When deciding how much to give, consider the level of hotel. A \$5 tip at the Marriott might translate into a \$20 tip at the Ritz. Still, tip what you can. If \$5 is a big deal to your budget, that's fine. Just make it a heartfelt gesture, say the concierges.

Tips are best given out at the end of the visit. If you -can't find the person who helped you to give thanks and tip in person, an envelope and a little note of thanks is fine.

- K.S.