

BRITAIN'S BUTLER BOOM

AND THE ASIA CONNECTION

The concept of the impossibly polished butler is as distinctly British as summer strawberries & cotted cream, or horses and hounds on the hunt. Despite the global recession, England is undergoing a booming demand for butlers. And now Rick Fink's respected Butler-Valet School has linked arms with an Eastern partner to bring authentic British service standards to Asia.

WORDS STEVEN KNIPP

Rising out of the bucolic rural countryside of Oxfordshire, Ditchley Park looks like the set for a Hollywood period film. But in fact the 290-year-old Georgian mansion is one of southern England's finest country homes.

Outside the stately residence, eight miles from Oxford, all is calm. But inside the manor, Rick Fink is busy, each year teaching some 30 enthusiastic students the delicate art and high science of being a butler in the modern age. And few men in the United Kingdom, if not the world, are more qualified to give instructions and advice in this rarefied field.

As a young Petty Officer in the Royal Navy, Rick helped serve Prince Philip and India's first Prime Minister Nehru during diplomatic ship-board dinner parties. And after leaving the Navy he personally looked after and served Queen Elizabeth II, Princess Margaret, Prince Charles and the late Princess Diana. Other

VIPs he has served includes UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, French President Giscard d'Estaing, South African President de Klerk and numerous British Prime Ministers.

In 2002 Rick opened the Butler-Valet school to "elevate the standards and show new trainee butlers how things should be done with passion, confidence and flair."

The students, he says, "have come from a wide variety of backgrounds but all are united with a wish to provide good service for their employers. We assess their differing personalities and aptitudes as we teach them and try to smooth any rough edges. But we cannot guarantee that they will always get employment at the end of their training courses. In the UK we always try to help them to get a job, but there may be different circumstances in Asia."

Asked if with such high standards, have there been any wash-outs, the amiable and



Regal Ditchley Park serves as training ground for Rick Fink's Butler Valet School.

über urbane Englishman says: "Certainly there have been a few examples where some students have made the wrong career choice; but these have fortunately been very rare occasions."

Since Rick first opened his school more than a dozen years ago, the world has seen massive economic upheavals. And new money from places like the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, and Asia, are now moving to the fore.

Asked about how this social-economic shift might affect the type of employers his graduates may encounter, the ever-discreet gentleman says: "In the butler's world we try to remain apart from the global economic upheavals and entirely true to the needs and care of our employers. Of course we know that wealthy individual people need a good butler in their homes, to re-assure them at the end of hard day, in the office or factory, and to be there to cosset them and their families.

"Here in Britain, we have always had the 'Traditional British Butler.' And it is our aim and ambition to ensure that these high standards of service and etiquette are both introduced and developed – whether it is in Russian, Middle Eastern or Asian households."

Indeed, Rick offers a course for employers who may not be familiar with the role of a family butler. "We feel that it is essential that those employers who decide to hire a butler should have an opportunity to learn about the many benefits and advantages which a good well-trained butler will bring to their households and families."

He says that for families who are considering recruiting a butler, the school is happy to arrange demonstration of the many skills of a butler, and the many advantages of employing one. "Both parties," he



Above: Rick with some of his students. Right: Rick with the Queen. Right: Alisa Lohitnavy training Thai military.

says, “have so much to gain from a full understanding of the butler’s role which may be a new concept in Asia generally.

“In our view most good butlers want to provide a lifetime of service for a considerate employer, so everybody needs to be well understood.”

According to a recent banking report, the number of US dollar millionaires in Asia rose by 10 percent in 2011 to an astonishing 3.3 million, and that figure will soon likely surpass the number of European and American millionaires. But Rick is not interested in getting into any discussion about new money employees vs. old money. The key criteria,” he insists, “must be whether or not an employer is considerate towards his domestic service staff - not his net worth.”

Still, the potential role of China in the future of the butler business looms large. “For several years,” Rick says, “we have been approached about the role of butlers in China. But we have

felt that the butlers’ position has not [yet] been well understood by wealthy people. However, as more and more Chinese people travel the world they will have experienced butler service in many different circumstances. We are traditionalists at The Butler-Valet School and we should be pleased to train students from and in China. We have not trained any Chinese students in England, which is why we now intend to open training schools in China, offering the same highest standards at all times, in Asia or elsewhere.”

THE ASIAN CONNECTION

With that in mind, last year Rick’s BVS formed a linkage with the Bangkok-based Image Matters Asia, which was founded in 2010 by image consultant and trainer Alisa Lohitnavy. Her corporate clients include such blue chip firms as HSBC, Bangkok Airways, Thai Military Bank, P&G, AIA, BASF and Kasikorn Bank.

“Our link with Alisa was a very fortunate opportunity for us both,” says Rick. “Alisa was exploring the role and idea of butler training in Asia as a complimentary extension of her very successful established manners and etiquette business; and we were looking for ways to develop into Asia. She approached us last year and after a cautious initial meeting, we soon established a close business relationship. We had previously trained a significant number of students from Bangkok and soon realized that we could work together with Alisa to make future progress. We look forward to sending our experienced butler trainers to Asia soon, to work alongside Alisa to develop the potential benefits of our close relationship.”

For her part, Alisa says “Image Matters Asia’s main focus has always been training in the image, body language and etiquette. When I say etiquette I mean both business and social etiquette. Etiquette training is the ability to behave with others according to the accepted social standards, showing courtesy and social grace – it’s not merely about your table manners. I do both Asian and Western-



style etiquette training. Regardless of what nationality you are and where you come from I think being etiquette-savvy brings you closer to those you deal with.

“I travel a great deal and am always dealing with people of different cultures. I find that most people are not culturally sensitive and lack the ability to “read” people of different cultures. And aside from being able to read all the non-verbal cues, one cannot get by without proper etiquette. It’s easy to set standards to grooming but proper etiquette is essential in connecting to others.

“My background is in headhunting and from that I realised that many candidates I dealt with could have done much better with some grooming tips and guidance in terms of their body language and etiquette skills. I then decided to do all my image, body language and facial expressions studies in the UK.

“Some 90 percent of my clients are corporations and to date I have worked with over 2,500 mid to senior executives, both Thais and Westerners. I have also conducted some training in the UK for those wanting to understand Asian culture and how to deal with Asians.”

Alisa’s most recent assignments are for image and etiquette classes with the Four Seasons Pudong in Shanghai. The courses will focus on style, how to dress for different body shapes, colour analysis, and hair and make up consultation. While her etiquette

course focuses on learning the art of entertaining – covering everything from invitation extension and acceptance protocols to dress codes for different events/functions, how to lay tables for different occasions (lunch, high tea and dinner), flower arrangement, and tea and cheese master classes.

Alisa says: “I contacted Rick because I wanted us to be able to offer the best and highest level of etiquette training to our clients. To me I cannot think of anyone more suitable than Rick. And plus given I am in the business of educating people, I liked the idea of butler training which to me would provide better career opportunities to those in Asia.

“Both Rick and I are passionate about what we do. I think what makes our collaboration special is our sharing of the same values. Rick, having worked for some of the oldest families in the UK, is a true expert in his area, and I have a very strong cross-cultural background, having lived and worked in the UK, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, So I believe we are offering the very best training in our areas of expertise with cultural differences in mind.”

Speaking specifically about China’s rapidly evolving society, Alisa says, “I have spent time in Hong Kong and China and have seen changes in both places in recent years. From my most recent visits to Shanghai and Beijing in June, and having spoken to many people, I believe

that image and etiquette courses are in great demand. As we all know, China is now a major emerging economy and Chinese are now travelling outside China in large numbers – both for business and pleasure. I believe social skills are skill sets that can be learned and are necessary in both personal and business dealings. The Chinese want to understand how to improve their grooming and appearance, how to build relationships with others through their non-verbal skills and, most importantly, learn international etiquette skills. As long as they are eager to learn, Rick and I are happy to provide them with the best knowledge.”

Adds Rick: “Generally we know that different cultures will follow their own established rules of etiquette and manners; but standards will vary widely from country to country.

“We expect that a Butler-Valet school trained butler will always have good manners, respect confidences, be discreet at all times and generally observe the highest standards of behaviour. We teach these standards to all students and have every confidence that our Asian training alongside Alisa’s skills in manners and etiquette will raise the status of butlers wherever they are trained and employed. We look forward to working with Alisa to achieve these aims and ambitions together throughout the Asia region.”

YOU RING MADAME?

For those who would like to learn more about professional butler service in Europe or Asia, both Rick Fink and Alisa welcome queries.

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