

Restaurant Server

Take orders, run food, get paid in tips the same night. The most common first job in America.

TYPICAL PAY

\$35,230

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$18k to \$65k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

0 years

after high school

DEMAND

Very high

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

No

anyone can do it

WHERE YOU WORK

**Diners, chain restaurants, bars,
hotels, fine dining rooms**

How you get there

- 1 Get any food service job** Any age from 14 to 16 depending on your state
Host, busser, dishwasher or food runner. Almost every server started in one of those and moved up inside the same restaurant.
- 2 Certifications** A weekend
A food handler card, and an alcohol seller-server certification if you will serve drinks. Both are cheap and take a few hours online.
- 3 Trail shifts** 1 to 2 weeks
You follow an experienced server for two to five unpaid or minimum-wage shifts, learning the menu, the system and the floor plan.
- 4 Your own section** First months
Start with the small or slow section. Prove you can handle five tables at once without losing one of them.
- 5 Move up or move out** Year 1 onward
A busier restaurant, a higher check average, bartending, or a shift lead and then management role.

Pros and cons

- + Money the same week, with no tuition and no debt
- + Flexible shifts that fit around school
- + You can work in any town in the country, immediately
- Income swings wildly with the season, the weather and your section
- Nights, weekends and holidays, permanently
- Rarely any health insurance or paid sick leave

Optional boosts

Move to a higher check average. Wine and cocktail knowledge. Bartending. Banquets and private events.

Good to know

\$2.13 an hour has not moved in decades

The federal cash wage for tipped workers is \$2.13 an hour, with employers allowed a tip credit of up to \$5.12 to reach the \$7.25 federal minimum. That \$2.13 figure has stayed the same for over thirty years.

Eight places have scrapped the tip credit

Alaska, California, Guam, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, Oregon and Washington require employers to pay tipped staff the full state minimum wage before any tips. Everywhere else, tips are counted to...

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Waiters and Waitresses (35-3031.00)
United States Department of Labor: minimum wages for tipped employees
ServSafe: food and alcohol safety certification
National Restaurant Association

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/server>



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