

[RESTAURANT NAME]

Restaurant Customer Service Playbook

SAMPLE — Section 6: Handling Food Complaints

Prepared by Final Approach Solutions

ABOUT THIS SAMPLE

This is Section 6 — Handling Food Complaints — from a complete 9-section Restaurant Customer Service Playbook, customized specifically for your restaurant. The full playbook also covers: Our Service Standard, The Table Greeting, Managing the Wait & Waitlist, Taking Orders, Table Maintenance & Pacing, Upselling Naturally, Closing the Table, and Escalation Contacts.

Every section includes staff scripts, checklists, and clear protocols — all customized to your restaurant name, team, and service style.

Section 6: Handling Food Complaints

A guest sending food back is not a catastrophe — it is an opportunity. How your team responds in the next 60 seconds will determine whether that guest comes back, tells their friends, or leaves a review you spend months trying to overcome.

The mindset shift: a complaint is a guest giving you a second chance. Most unhappy guests say nothing and never return. The ones who speak up are doing you a favor. Treat them that way.

Part A: When Food Is Sent Back

This is the highest-stakes moment in a dining experience. Everything that happens next must be fast, warm, and decisive.

Food Complaint — What to Always Do

- ✓ Remove the dish immediately — never leave it sitting on the table while you talk
- ✓ Apologize sincerely before any explanation or question
- ✓ Alert the kitchen and manager on duty every single time food is sent back
- ✓ Offer a replacement first — not a discount. A replacement shows care; a discount feels like a buyout
- ✓ Follow up within 2 minutes of the replacement arriving to confirm it is right
- ✓ Comp or discount at the manager's discretion — never promise it without approval
- ✓ Note the table in the system or tell your manager so the exit is handled with extra warmth

INITIAL RESPONSE	<i>"I am so sorry — that is absolutely not what we want for you. Let me take this back right away."</i>
OFFER REPLACEMENT	<i>"I would love to get you something that is perfect. Can I have the kitchen remake that for you, or would you prefer something else from the menu?"</i>
WHILE THEY WAIT	<i>"I have let the kitchen know and they are working on it now. Can I bring you anything in the meantime — more bread, a refill?"</i>
FOLLOW-UP AFTER REPLACEMENT	<i>"How is that one? I want to make sure we got it exactly right for you this time."</i>
TABLE EXIT	<i>"It was really important to us to make tonight right for you. We hope you will give us another chance — it would mean a lot to have you back."</i>

Part B: The De-Escalation Sequence

If a guest becomes upset — whether about food, service, wait time, or anything else — use this four-step sequence. It works in virtually every situation.

STEP 1 STOP & LISTEN	Let them finish completely without interrupting. Do not explain, justify, or defend while they are still talking. Silence is not weakness — it is the first act of de-escalation.
STEP 2 ACKNOWLEDGE	Reflect back what you heard and validate the emotion. You are not agreeing they are right — you are showing them they were heard. This is the single most powerful thing you can do.
STEP 3 APOLOGIZE	Apologize for the experience, regardless of who is at fault. "I am so sorry that happened" is always appropriate and never admits liability.
STEP 4 ACT	Tell them exactly what happens next. If you can fix it, fix it immediately. If you need a manager, get one now — do not leave the guest waiting without a clear next step.

ACKNOWLEDGE	<i>"I hear you, and I am truly sorry. That is not the experience we want for you — not even close."</i>
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**ACT — CAN
FIX**

"Here is what I am going to do right now: [specific action]. I will be back with you in just a few minutes."

ESCALATE

"I want to make sure this is fully resolved. Let me get my manager over to you right now — they will be here in just a moment."

What Never to Say

These phrases feel like natural responses but almost always make the situation worse:

- × "That dish is made the same way every time." — the guest does not care; it was wrong for them
- × "Did you specify how you wanted it cooked?" — puts the blame back on the guest
- × "The kitchen has been really busy tonight." — not the guest's problem
- × "There is nothing I can do." — there is always something
- × "Calm down." — no one in history has ever calmed down when told to
- × "That is our policy." — as a final answer, this ends the relationship

When to Involve a Manager

Get a manager immediately when:

- Any food allergy concern is raised — even after the meal is served
- A guest raises their voice or becomes aggressive toward staff
- Food is sent back a second time at the same table
- A guest mentions leaving a review or contacting anyone externally
- You have attempted to resolve the issue and the guest remains upset
- Any mention of illness or physical reaction to food — this is a health and liability issue

Bringing in a manager is not failure — it is professionalism. Your manager exists for these moments.

This is a sample from a complete section in the Restaurant Customer Service Playbook.

Interested in the full version? Contact Final Approach Solutions at fasolutionsoffice@gmail.com