



📷 For maids Fiona Wu and Aurelie Cochet, staying a step ahead of their principal is a skill aided by a few old-school tricks. Picture: Chris Pavlich

Lifestyle

For today's butlers and maids, discretion remains a priority

Naomi White, The Daily Telegraph

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THEY work in lavish homes and spend their days mixing martinis, polishing crystal and generally taking care of the running of wealthy households. But one thing butlers and maids will never do is gossip about what goes on behind the doors of where they work. Good butlers never disclose their employer, and confidentiality agreements ensure this rule is never breached — furthering the secrecy.

And given how heavily vetted candidates are — police checks and a current RSA certificate and clean driving record are often required before even applying (non-smokers only) — few would risk their position by revealing too much to outsiders.

But online job listings for butlers offer small insights into the role. One ad for a job at a three-level Point Piper home describes the main priority as an ability to recall a principal's preferences, alongside wardrobe management and shoe polishing.

Casual rates for housekeepers and maids range from \$20-\$35 per hour, while annual salaries for butlers can vary from \$60,000 to \$100,000.

It's estimated that fewer than 500 butlers, including those hired by hotels, work in Australia.

For the elite few welcomed into the estates and gated homes of those who hire them, it can be a rewarding career.

Gavin Ambrose, a career butler who works in NSW and the ACT and helps train newcomers at the prestigious Magnums Butler Academy, says butlers need to be a "jack-in-a-box, with your finger on the pulse all the time".



📷 Gavin Ambrose has been a butler almost all his working life.

Ambrose says the job has modernised, but the “old-fashioned values” of discretion and etiquette remain.

As does staying a step ahead of his principal, a skill is aided by a few old-school tricks.

“I have a little book and I write down all the dos and don’ts about each individual person. And their guests — what they like as well, so that if they come back and you’re tired one

day, you can refer back to it,” he says.

“It’s about knowing as much about that guest as you can. You can do a Google search on just about everyone today and find about some of their values, what their likes and dislikes are.”

Being a butler is still very much about being seen and not heard, Ambrose says, and knowing when to approach people.

When he can’t speak to someone directly, he types a note for them to answer at their convenience.

His days can be as long as 8am to midnight and as short as 8am to 3pm, and may be as varied as cooking breakfast for guests and helping pack their bags, to organising travel and household goods, and making sure their favourite things are well stocked so they don’t need to ask for anything.

He also keeps updated on fine art and how it’s to be handled, maintains clothing and works with chefs to design menus for elaborate dinners and sources wines to match.

“In the training, we talk about the attributes of being a butler, the decorum, the way you stand, the way you greet people, how you receive guests and introduce them to other people,” Ambrose says.

“You need to know about food and beverages and how to set up and serve morning and afternoon tea. Flower arrangement — it’s good to have that as an extra.”

Chief executive officer and principal of Australian Butler Service Christopher Reid says demand in Australia is good, though not on par with the mega-wealthy households of the US and Europe.

Reid says the industry has changed considerably in the last few decades and butlers now take more of a house management role.



📷 The industry has changed considerably in the last few decades, the people in service now take more of a house management role.



📷 For maids Fiona Wu and Aurelie Cochet, an average day involves cleaning, folding, ironing, organising and tidying. Picture: Chris Pavlich



📷 The job (of butler or maid) has modernised, but the “old-fashioned values” of discretion and etiquette remain. Picture: Chris Pavlich

It's not just for the young, either. Those who apply to be placed through Reid's service have often had successful careers. They have been owners of lucrative businesses, even lawyers. And an increasing number are women.

Reid is selective, keeping a keen eye out for people “with a heart for service” and weeding out those simply in search of lavish live-in accommodation or the chance to drive the

boss's car.

“You have to have great cleaning skills, excellent time management, be highly competent in organisation, very intuitive and think out of the box,” he says.

And it's definitely not all top-class work — be prepared to clean the toilet, and know how to make a good cup of tea.

“We really become walking encyclopedias. From glassware to tableware, to furnishing to clothing, to cars to particulars, to personal tastes and extravagances.”

It's vital to know the house in detail, down to the material of each piece of furniture, where it was made and if it's replaceable, even knowing the paint on the walls.

Aurelie Cochet has been working as a maid since arriving in Sydney from France six months ago.

For her, an average day involves cleaning, folding, ironing, organising and tidying.

And it's all worth it for the “big, pretty houses” she gets to work at.

Fiona Wu has been a clientele manager at placement service Maid In Sydney — where Aurelie works — for three years.

“Usually the clients are very busy working professionals and busy families — CEOs, sometimes you may have a celebrity. They do tend to be high-net-worth individuals or working professionals,” Wu says.

“They want someone to come to the home and take care of everything required to make life easier for them. It's definitely more than just a cleaning service; cleaning is part of what we do, but not all. Sometimes clients ask us to prep the meals, we're able to receive tradespeople, gardeners, pool cleaners, dog walkers.

“All can be taken care of,” she says.

But no matter how posh the household in Sydney, it's unlikely to be a match for the pomp and ceremony of Britain. Former royal butler Grant Harrold worked for Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall and says while the job was not so different to working in other households, it did have its perks — including riding in a royal convoy to a private ball held by the Queen.

“This one night, I remember the Duchess asked, ‘Are you going to come to the ball?’

“She said if I came she would dance with me. The prince said, ‘You can come with us in the convoy,’ and I'm thinking, ‘This can't be happening. This doesn't happen to somebody

like me.’

“Almost immediately, the dancing begins. I tucked myself out the way and the Duchess of Cornwall did see me. She came across the room and said, ‘Grant, shall we dance?’ When you dance with a royal, other people are dancing but you get your own space. It’s like a scene from the King And I.

“Then I turned around and the Queen was next to me. I said ‘Good evening, Your Majesty,’ and before I knew it I was in a reel dance with the Queen, the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Edinburgh and the Duchess of Cornwall.

“It was an amazing moment.”

SPILLING THE BEANS

All the confidentiality agreements in the world couldn’t stop the hired help from revealing secrets about these employers:



📷 Butler Paul Burrell with his charge Diana Princess of Wales.

PRINCESS DIANA

Butler Paul Burrell has milked their professional relationship in two memoirs, *A Royal Duty* (2003) and *The Way We Were: Remembering Diana* (2006), as well as in countless interviews. He claims Diana was not serious about Dodi Fayed, with whom she died in 1997, and was in love with cardiologist Hasnat Khan. He has also divulged details of her troubled marriage to Prince Charles.

JUDE LAW

When the British actor's nanny, Daisy Wright (below left), was fired after their affair was brought to light, the jilted mistress spoke in tabloid interviews of their steamy sessions, even claiming one of his children caught them in the act. She said Law kept in contact with her after the fallout and shared her bitterness at being fired.

BRANGELINA

Nannies for Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt spoke out in 2010, claiming their children were out of control, using bad language, eating a junk-food diet and watching R-rated films. They said Maddox, aged just nine, was allowed to drink wine and drive a car around their property. This month, after the couple's marriage breakup, Jolie's former nanny Krisann Morel, publicly accused Jolie of "demonising" Pitt, as her own mother, Marcheline Bertrand, had done to her father, Jon Voight, after their split in 1977.

NIGELLA LAWSON

After being accused of defrauding Nigella Lawson's ex-husband of more than \$1 million, two former personal assistants, sisters Francesca and Elisabetta Grillo (below), claimed the domestic goddess had smoked pot in front of her children and often snorted cocaine. Lawson admitted trying drugs but denied regular use.