

Butlers

The art of service

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PHOTOGRAPHY: Bussy Gedlek, Getty Images, courtesy of Ton de Wit



With around 5,000 butlers employed in service in the UK, and with many British-trained butlers working overseas in areas such as China, Brazil and India, it's clear that new wealth families are employing private service staff to assist in the management of their lives. *Best of the Best* talks to Anthony de Wit about his career as a butler, turned trainer, and poses questions for those who want to employ a butler

Anthony de Wit is an archetypal butler whose career has included working for some of the most influential people in the world including royal families. Talking to Ton (as his friends call him) it is clear that he has had a great influence on all who meet him, from growing up in a large family in Amsterdam to currently working as a specialist training consultant for International Yacht Services (IYS) aboard superyachts around the world.



'After my training period I was allowed to work at the private palace of the family to serve them breakfast, lunch and dinner. One week there, another week in the Grand Palace to maintain the silver, do office work and prepare for any of the large banquets and state visits. Soon I became one of the family's favourites to help serve when friends came to dine.'

Ton's career in service really started at the very early age of 12 when he helped out in the family's coffee shop, and possibly where his love for cooking and serving took him to study hotel hospitality. At 18 he joined KNSM, a shipping company operating in the Caribbean and USA, as a pastry chef, followed by a six-year stint with the Royal Navy where he learnt how to run and organise the housekeeping. He tells *Best of the Best* that the mandatory part of his training included fire fighting and three months of disciplines such as marching and shooting, plus a good dose of personal wellbeing bringing his standards to a valuable level, which were to be recognised by his soon to be employer. In 1970, HRH The Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands boarded the ship he was serving on and here Ton takes up the story: 'I was behind the bar and asked the Prince if I could come and work for him as a butler. He was impressed by my judo efforts in Kobe where I had beaten a whole lot of competitors and said he could use a bloke like me'.

his entrepreneurial spirit and a positive outlook on life he decided to sell the business and went into consultancy and management for various hospitality businesses, but still the urge was there to be part of a private family and to go back into service as a butler, which he did for several well-known families, and again for a short time with Prince Bernhard.

Ton took up training on board superyachts to inject some quality training, drawing on his own skills base, and to impart knowledge which he finds lacking today. 'I work for IYS now because I've known Peter Vogel for many years. I know his qualities and industry knowledge and together we share a passion for great service.'

Ton feels that the superyacht industry in particular needs professional training so that owners can arrive on board and feel 'at home'. The same goes for charter guests, for the money they pay they deserve to be served by high quality crew during their stay on board.

Ton joined the royal family and received six months of intensive training at the palace – etiquette, service, communication, silver and gold maintenance, shoe care etc.

BELOW:

De Wit takes superyacht crew through their paces on how best to serve owners and on board guests as part of the Diamond Collection courses that the Interior Yacht Services team has set up to lay down an industry standard to achieve the highest level of service



BELOW:

With many superyacht owners needing the same level of service they get at home, having a trained crew is very important



Ton de Wit: Four fundamental questions about butlers based on his experience and expertise

What exactly are butlers expected to do?

A butler is responsible for the family and their lifestyle, it's his/her responsibility to coordinate the lifestyle seamlessly. A modern butler is the conductor of the household on management level and functions most of the time as PA to his/her employer.

I have been a gentleman, hired by the family to be a 'friend' to the head of the family. I drove him, played golf and worked out with him in the gym with his personal coach. Holidays were spent in Aspen and we visited the horse races and other activities. I was the spider in his lifestyle web; I cooked, performed household chores duties, repaired anything in the house and kept the garden immaculate.

In general a butler starts of as a footman, he/she gets more and more tasks assigned and after X amount of time they get promoted to an official butler position. It's important to become a trusted and valued member of the household during this time.



The 'new money' butler obtains his/her skills through professional education institutions. Hospitality degree, followed by a four to 12 week education as a butler would be the usual approach, but there are great examples of people who've become butlers through different paths.

As a butler it's important to continue to learn new things, a day spent without learning is a day wasted – computer, HR and management skills and so on – as nowadays the job as a butler has many facets and the business side has become increasingly more important.

Is there a qualification for a butler?

There is no official, globally recognise qualification. There are many academies around the world, which are seen to lead the path. One of the well-known academies was run by Ivor Spencer in London, who sadly passed away 2009. Another well-known butler, Robert Watson, created the Guild of Professional English Butlers, however this is solely used to accredit the establishment and not the individual butler. Most of the training institutions that we currently see popping up globally are run by charlatans that have never worked as butlers. They are jumping into a market where they can place the individual after the training, while charging up to 35 per cent of an annual salary, which can easily range between €50,000 to €100,000.

I feel that there is a need for the private service industry to come together and change this by implementing global training standards. Together with Peter Vogel I have assisted the yachting industry to create such a standard. It is here we can set an example. The Professional Yachting Association took the lead back in 2011, while Peter designed the curriculums for the interior training modules together with Joey Meen. It was then regularly shared with 22 training providers globally, discussed many times in the course of 18 months and amended before being launched into the industry as the guidelines to follow as a training provider. Our industry came together successfully to increase the levels of service enjoyed by owners and guests on board yachts. [iys](http://www.iys-nl.com)

Do owners travel with their butlers (i.e. private homes around the world, jets, superyachts)?

Not always, but yes, butlers are requested to either accompany the owner or travel ahead to prepare the yacht, jet or residence for arrival. Often there are multiple butlers hired to ensure that all properties and assets in general are adequately staffed and ensuring employers well-being.

What qualities and attributes does a butler need?

Besides the professional hospitality qualifications the psychological element to the role should not be underestimated. A family exists of many members and they normally all need a different approach. With 'old money' you as a butler are to adapt to the strict rules set in the household. When working for 'new money' there is a possibility that you can design your position in a way that is pleasant for both parties.

The 'old money' butler gets his/her education as he/she grows up. Normally the son of the butler or the son of the gardener at the house is prepared to take over one day from the butler of the house. He would be taught anything to do with the job as a butler as a footman, which we could label as in-house education.

Contacts
For more information visit: www.iys-nl.com

