



The butler did it

If you don't have a butler these days, you're not a real celebrity. Meeting the new demand for highly skilled butlers is the South African Butler Academy in Cape Town, which turns its students into the right-hand men (and women) of the super-rich

By SUSAN HAYDEN Photographs by BRUCE TUCK



Newton Cross (at piano in the pink tie) and his butler talent

The word "butler" conjures images of stiff-lipped, grey-haired gentlemen in livery, wielding trays through the draughty manors of Jane Austen's England. But in fact, as the world's number of millionaires and billionaires steadily increases, so too has the demand for this seemingly antiquated profession. As the castles and chateaus of the olden-day mega-rich have largely been replaced by luxury yachts and villas scattered across the globe, so too has the job of the butler changed with time.

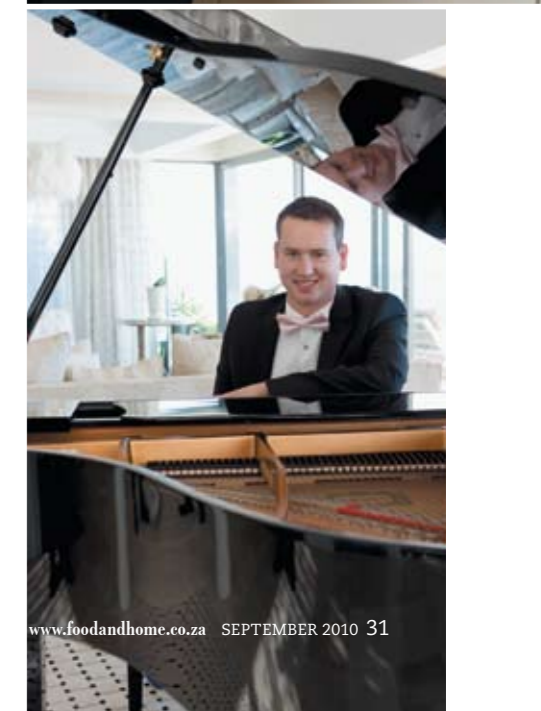
everything goes perfectly according to plan; that their client's every whim is taken care of, and that no need – spoken or otherwise – goes unmet." Newton's decision to open a butler school was based on the realisation that while there wasn't enough of him to go around, there were plenty of young, energetic South Africans looking for an opportunity to work hard, travel and earn some good money. Although young, Newton has extensive experience working for some of the world's most influential

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"The old, Jeeves-style form of butlering still exists, particularly in England, but for the most part what clients require is a lifestyle manager," says Newton Cross. This 27-year-old South African and British-trained butler has recently opened the very successful South African Butler Academy in Cape Town, in response to the growing need for skilled, properly trained butlers.

"The wealthy are always travelling, holidaying and socialising on a grand scale," he says, "and this lifestyle requires enormous amounts of preparation and co-ordination. The modern butler's job is to make sure

people, and his school reflects the perfectionism and attention to detail which make his skills so in demand. After enduring a rigorous screening and interviewing process to make sure they fit the "butler bill", Newton's 15 recruits embark on an eight-week training programme, where they are taught everything from how to make a bed (military-precision style) to arranging a formal, seven-course dinner. They are taught, amongst other things, how to pack properly (shoes in bags, clothes separated by tissue-paper); how to fold and iron (different cuffs are ironed differently;





when to iron out or leave the crease); how to polish silver; how to set tables and trays (a different arrangement for each meal) and how to turn down a bed honeymoon-style, should an amorous evening be on the agenda.

Butlers will seldom make a bed themselves, however. Their job – as it has been for centuries – is to supervise the rest of the staff. They are in charge of the smooth running of the household, and are responsible for all other staff members performing their tasks correctly. It's important to know how to do things like make the perfect bed to ensure that the necessary standards are upheld.

The English word "butler" derives from the old French *bouteillier* ("bottle bearer"), since the butler was traditionally in charge of the dining room, the wine cellar and the pantry. Nowadays, the butler is more likely to be making sure that his client's laptop, i-pod and cellphone are charged, that the temperature in his hotel room is just right and (as John Travolta is known to stipulate) that his suite has its own meditation room.

"It's very important that the client and the butler are well matched," says Newton. "They are going to be spending a lot of time in each other's company, so I have to make sure that the fit is good. Some clients have special requests and require special skills, for example I have just recruited a student who is also a masseur and yoga instructor to work for a client who travels a great deal for business. He will be a 'valet butler', in charge of packing and travel arrangements, while also providing massages and yoga lessons. Some clients require their butler to be a chef; some want them to double as the au pair."

There to provide trainees with top-notch cooking skills is chef Renaye Warren, who has a long history of working with celebrities. Her previous clients include Nicolas Cage, John Travolta and Brad Pitt.

While butlering is traditionally a male-dominated field, there is increasing

demand for woman butlers. Says Newton, "Women clients request women butlers, especially if the job involves caring for children. Some women, especially those from the Middle East, are more comfortable having a woman in such close proximity."

Most of Newton's trainee butlers are in their mid-twenties. One, a thick-set young man from a farming background, has just been recruited to work in Namibia for a wealthy farmer. He resigned from his job as a restaurant manager to do this. When I ask him why, he says his dream is to save enough to open his own chain of restaurants, which would be impossible on his manager's salary.

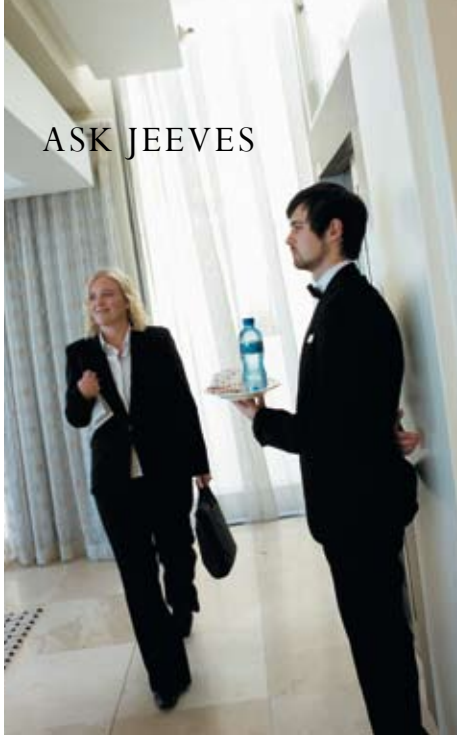
"So you'll be earning more doing this?" I probe.

"Five times as much," he tells me. Certainly one of the more appealing aspects of the job is the money. New butlers, straight out of school, can earn R15 000 a month; many earn much more. With no expenses, it is possible to save and put aside a nest-egg. There are also the benefits of travel, tips, gifts and living in extraordinarily lavish surrounds – even if one is, to all intents and purposes, a slave.

"Make no mistake, the job is demanding," Newton says. "You are on call 24/7 and you have no real off-time unless your client tells you that you are not needed. Your working day begins one hour before your client wakes up and ends one hour after they go to bed. This can be very, very late, and there is no such thing as 'no'. As a butler, your maxim is, 'The answer is yes, what is the question?' and sometimes what is required will go way beyond what you thought you signed up to do."

Newton recalls working for a South African entrepreneur and getting a call at 2am, informing him that in one hour, 100 guests would arrive at the house for a party and would need sushi. Newton drove to the only 24-hour Woolworths in town, bought every type of fish he could lay his hands on, raced home and started frantically preparing sushi. At

ASK JEEVES



3am, in brilliant butler style, platters of sushi to feed 100 people were ready and waiting. Only nobody showed up. His client had changed his mind and not bothered to tell him.

Another time, a wife bent on revenge against her philandering husband had Newton arrange a lavish party at their home, inviting everyone famous she knew. When the morning of the party dawned, she got on a plane and flew overseas, leaving her husband to cope with 90 expected guests and millions of rands worth of food, champagne and decor that had been ordered. The party was cancelled, and when the caterer showed up bearing boxes of lobster tails, fillet mignon and caviar, Newton had no choice but to pay for it and take it all down to the local soup kitchen, where the homeless people of the City Bowl enjoyed the best meal of their lives.

While the butler's tasks might have changed with time, some rules remain the same. Discretion is vital, more so than ever in the media-savvy modern world. You do not speak unless spoken to, and you must be like air: invisible and indispensable.

Newton has worked with a long line of A-listers and won't talk about their personal lives. He can reveal that Hillary Clinton wears very sexy lingerie; John Cleese is depressive, picky and lives on goat's milk and cheese; Shania Twain is rather short; Thabo Mbeki eats steamed vegetables for breakfast; Nelson Mandela is even warmer and more personable than you'd expect and Uma Thurman is sweet, self-conscious and down to earth.

Since butlers are not allowed to carry bags, yet must be ready to deal with any kind of emergency, their suit jackets double as carry-alls. Newton shows me the inside of his jacket where the lining has been separated and made into a large pocket.

"This is the butler's secret compartment, and the key to success," he tells me. On the left is a shoeshine kit (sometimes a scuff occurs when the client walks from the limousine to the

aeroplane – not okay), and on the right, a nail kit and a bottle of the female client's perfume (just before Hillary Clinton disembarks from her private jet, her butler sprays a mist of Chanel into the air and she walks through it so that, on arrival, she always smells like an angel).

Another vital requisite is a contact list – you never know what your client is going to demand. Not knowing the number of a 24-hour beautician meant that one butler had to perform a Brazilian wax on his South African TV-celeb client before she left for a party. A British socialite once decided to host an impromptu children's tea party. Money was no object, but one thing she had to have was an elephant. Some quick thinking and a telephone call to the London Zoo and an elephant was delivered, to the tune of 1.5-million pounds. Except it started to rain and the party had to be held indoors instead, so the elephant was sent back.

Butlers, says Newton, learn to accept that anything is possible. He has been air-lifted, by helicopter, from the Queen Mary II and flown to his client's apartment in Manhattan to fetch her pillow from her bed (the ship's pillows were dreadful, you see). The trick is always thinking on your feet, employing a big dose of common sense and learning to anticipate your client's needs before they arise.

If you're not afraid of hard work and don't mind having zero personal life, this job has some amazing perks. You get to experience a world that we ordinary plebs don't know about, and if you do your job well, your client's gratitude translates into serious cash.

Says Newton, "One realises that the seriously rich inhabit a different universe, and it's not your job to ask questions. Just make it happen, and the reward is a fascinating journey."

The South African Butler Academy, call 021-465-0078, email info@butleracademy.co.za or visit www.butleracademy.co.za.