

## Absinthe Brasserie and Bar's Maître d' Brad Smith

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*This is The Gatekeepers, wherein Eater roams the city to meet the fine men and women standing between you and some of your favorite dining destinations.*



[Photo: [Jennifer Yin](#)]

**Absinthe Brasserie and Bar** has been a steadily swank supplier of pre- and post-theater eats since it opened at the corner of Gough and Hayes Streets in 1998. And when Top Chef **Jamie Lauren** came into the picture in August of 2007 -- almost concurrent with the legalization of the business' namesake, absinthe liquor -- the restaurant experienced an energetic new push into the spotlight. Add in the current extensive artisanal cocktail program managed by **Carlos Yturria** and outside-the-box sweets created by pastry chef **Luis Villavelasquez**; and its no shocker there's a crowded bar and a wait list for unreserved seating almost nightly. Now Top Chef Lauren's last day will be June 26th, but we imagine the waits aren't going anywhere. So you should get to know **Brad Smith**, the courageous spirit who's been managing that persistent front-of-house bustle for over eight years.

[Brad Smith on everything from superhero drawings to Stars, here >>](#)

**Brad Smith, Maître d' Absinthe Brasserie:** We seat about 95 to 110 guests per turn on a busy night. Sometimes I like a quiet ambiance for dining and sometimes I want the buzz. **8 p.m. on a Saturday night, what's the wait for a table?** Saturday night,

actually most nights, the wait can mean just moments or many, many moments. We can find a way to get you in. All a guest needs is some patience and a friend to pass time with, and we'll do the rest!

**Is there anything I can say to make my wait shorter?** There is nothing one can say or do if we haven't any open tables. As far as cash or "gifts" to minimize or eliminate the wait, I guess I've seen it all, but really, most people know better. **What have people tried?** Guests will thank people who hold a position like mine, but thanking...can of course include something of value which is distinct from a bribe! **One of the sweetest thank-you gifts I've ever been given is a superhero drawing given to me by a famous Wagnerian singer's son.** It remains fixed to my fridge at home.

**Tell me about your favorite customers. Any celebs been by recently?** Some of our customers have known me since the late 70's and early 80's when I was a college student and waiter at Larry Mindel's **MacArthur Park**. It's quite a privilege. I'm fortunate to know many of the great artists of our time because of Absinthe's proximity to the Opera House and Symphony Hall.

**How do you deal with VIPs, when there are no tables left to give?** There is always a way to make a guest feel welcome. Truly, we are all VIP's to someone right? That's how I approach it.

**What's the most outrageous request from a customer you've had to accommodate?** I don't think of any request as "outrageous." If people ask for something, they must need it! **Any requests you recall that you couldn't accommodate?** I can't think of a thing.

**Where are you eating when you're not at Absinthe?** Like many in this way of life, sometimes I crave really simple food. Most often at home, I enjoy the stuff I grew up on... you know, like burgers, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and macaroni and cheese.

**What's the item on the current menu that more people should know about?** I love Jamie's hamachi crudo. Her soups are amazing too! Also, my Mom is a Texan so you can imagine why I love the pork confit.

**How, if at all, has Absinthe changed since Jamie was on Top Chef? Are you getting a new breed of clientele?** For years this neighborhood relied on the performing arts crowd. Now, thanks to our proprietor's vision, Jamie's food and management skills, the service staff, our incredible bar and a remarkable group of kitchen personnel, not to mention the tireless managers, we are busy all the time!

**Once upon a time, you were also the maitre d' at the legendary Stars under Jeremiah Tower. In your opinion, what's the legacy of Tower and Stars? And how has the dining scene changed because of that restaurant?** JT was actually very frugal. He would raid going out of business and liquidation sales. He always put the people, food and drinks first. He didn't spend a lot on advertising because the "product" did the talking for him. Even the walls of the restaurant were about guests – adorned with photographs of regulars, flowers and a little memorabilia. I think he showed us in spades that one doesn't have to create a lovely little "mausoleum" for dining. He knew that the most beautiful of all things were the guests themselves!

**If Stars opened today, how would it be received? Would it work?** Absolutely! Actually, what we do at Absinthe is very much like Stars. The difference is only one of scale and maybe a little less drinking!

**At the end of the day, what's the one Gatekeeper tool you need to do your job?** Gratitude for all the help I get from my colleagues.