

Etiquette Experts Provide Food For Thought On The Dining Experience



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With any dining event, several factors play into the outcome of the experience. What to wear? Where to sit? How to eat and not look like a fool? Dining etiquette may vary, but certain techniques on how to prevent a dining faux pas may help diners avoid an awkward predicament.

As a child, I always set the table, and I learned that drinks were placed above and to the left of the plate. Elbows were never allowed on the table, and mother always reminded my brother and I to put our napkin on our lap so we wouldn't spill on ourselves. When we drank beverages with a straw, we were told not to slurp. I was told to finish everything on my plate before being excused from the table – unless to use the restroom, of course.

That was the extent of my lessons in dining technique. Everything else I've either learned by (sometimes unsuccessful) experimentation. Here are some other dining techniques that may

Sir Winston's fine dining establishment aboard the Queen Mary offers an elegant table setting where diners may enjoy a business lunch or dinner date and practice dining etiquette. As seen here, forks are typically placed at the left of the plate setting with knives on the right and the bread plate on the left side. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

make you think twice about those sometimes not-so-apparent dining factors and the importance of planning ahead.

Preparation Is Key

Keith Landry, the Queen Mary's food and beverage director, suggests each dining experience should be approached with a plan. "If guests are going out for a special occasion, let it be known to the management that it is a special occasion," he says. "On holidays, it's going to be a lot busier."

It is the host's responsibility to set the pace of the event, so he or she should communicate to the restaurant beforehand or to the server at the restaurant before the event begins on how and when the meal should be served.

Depending on the culture and style of the restaurant and the event, guests should understand the dress code. Landry says restaurants today are getting rid of the "jacket required" standard, but it is still important to ask how to dress appropriately. Researching the restaurant ahead of time by using the Internet and social media may be helpful with this, as well as for determining if the establishment can accommodate to particular dietary needs.

Once the event is set and guests arrive, Anna Post, author and spokesperson for the Emily Post Institute, says it is best to wait at the front lobby of the establishment or in the bar, unless there is no other option than to wait at the table. Making a reservation is key to execute appropriate arrival for the meal, Landry says. "Always arrive 15 minutes before the reservation," he suggests, because things can happen in a restaurant that could postpone immediate seating.

Landry says drinks may be appropriate if it is understood that alcohol is appropriate for the function, and Post agrees. Only order a cocktail if the host is having one, but limit to one. One of Post's favorite tips is to hold a cocktail in the left hand to keep the right hand dry for greeting guests. She also suggests avoiding cocktail food if it's being passed around. "I don't want to shake someone's hand when they've been touching food," she says. "Think about the type of food as well. You should never feel the need to wipe your hand on your pants."

The Dining Experience

Post suggests discussing seating arrangements before sitting down or offer the host of the meal to delegate seating. "If you are

at a business lunch, if there is a host to the lunch rather than two colleagues or peers, look to that person to where they want to sit. It's nice to pay them the courtesy of asking." For a dining date, Post says the date hosts seats his or her date on the inside seat to provide him or her with a view of the restaurant. The purpose of facing each other is to maintain eye contact. "Next to having a good time, eye contact is the most important thing on a date," she says. This same sentiment goes for business meetings as well.

Once the party has seated, Post says napkins should be placed on the lap. When excusing oneself from the table, the napkin should be folded and placed loosely on the left side of the plate rather than left on the seat. "The world of etiquette will not shake, crumble and fall if a napkin is left on your seat," she says. "The idea behind this is if you're using your napkin to wipe your mouth or if you've gotten some sauce on it or if something has dripped or fallen into your lap, you don't want to then accidentally sit on that or get that onto the chair seat."

A general rule is to not begin eating until everyone at the table has been served, unless the host signals to start. Also, avoid stirring drinks loudly or chewing on ice at the table.

Whether a meal comes in courses or not, Post says to offer bread or rolls if someone asks. "If it's just in front of you, offer once to the left, take one for yourself, and then pass to the right," she says. "If there's a gap in seats, go with it." Bread should be either broken in half before buttering or dipping in oil, Post suggests. Landry says cutting the bread in half with a knife is appropriate at some establishments, but Post disagrees. "Put the roll on the plate, tear it in half and then butter," she says. "[Something] I see a few times a year is people making bread and butter sandwiches. Leave that at home."

If passing condiments, Post and Landry agree that it is wise to taste the food before adding things like salt and pepper. At fine dining establishments, salt won't be found on the table and it's likely a server will come to the table to offer freshly ground pepper. "The beauty of pepper is you can see it, so we know when to say 'When,'" Post says.

Soup or salad may be served before an entrée. Post says it is best to spoon the soup away from you; that way there is less of a chance you'll slop on your lap. Crumbling crackers into soup is OK if crackers are provided, but Post says asking for crackers at more upscale establishments is not appropriate if not offered. If the soup has noodles, cut them with the side of the spoon. Post cautions ordering soups with noodles, however, because eating a bowl of ramen on business is likely too difficult when wanting to look professional.

For salads, cut the lettuce if necessary. If toiling over whether or not to cut a small tomato, Landry's rule is put a full grape tomato in the mouth, but cut a cherry tomato in half. Post says to choose as you like, but proceed with caution.

With an entrée, it is best to not cut up the entire meal at once, Post says. Cutting a bite or two at a time is a general rule for two reasons – food will cool more quickly when it is all cut up, and it makes the guest look like a little kid and "implies you don't know how to chew your food properly," she says. Landry says he prefers eating European style – holding the knife in the right hand and eating with the fork in the left hand – as it is a more traditional way of eating than some American styles of putting the knife down and eating with the fork in the right hand.

Only the eater knows when he or she is finished, Post says, so don't feel pressured to clean the plate. "Do as you are comfortable," she suggests. "Enjoy and be comfortable with your food more than anything else." Try to keep the same eating pace with everyone else. When finished, Post says it is impolite to stack

plates or ball up the napkin and toss it on the table or plate. Doggie bags may be appropriate at some dining establishments, but typically food isn't taken home from higher end restaurants unless they offer to-go options.

Near the end of the meal or during a break in conversation is the more graceful time to excuse oneself from the table, Post says. Smokers should make it through the meal without taking a cigarette break, Landry suggests.

Just In Case

If something just can't be swallowed, how do you spit it out? What if something falls off the plate? What if I drop a utensil? What if the waiter gets my order wrong? There is always the chance a dining mishap will occur. Before all of those "What if's" give you too much anxiety, here are a few quick fixes:

- Food may be discretely pulled out of the mouth with a finger and the thumb or a fork and placed on the plate, Post suggests. "It's much more graceful than you might think," she says. If the item is an olive pit, it may be spit on a fork and put in the designated pit container or on the plate. She and Landry disagree on using a napkin; Post suggests not spitting in a napkin because it "looks like you are vomiting in your napkin." Landry says it's OK to spit in the napkin if you ask the server for a new one. If the food item can't be pulled out gracefully, excuse yourself from the table with a hand signal and go to the restroom, Post says.

- Post's rule with food that falls off the plate is that if it's sticky, leave it. "The idea is you want to be discrete," she says. "If it's a huge mess, let the waiter know. Otherwise leave it." Landry's rule is to never put it back on the plate, and suggests using a napkin to cover the mess. Another option is to pick it off and put it on your bread plate and then ask for a new bread plate.

- The server is also the go-to person for a clean utensil, in the event you drop one on the floor. Landry cautions not to put the fork back on the table; leave it or pick it up and directly hand it to the server.

- If the server gives you the wrong order, politely let the waiter know without being too aggressive. Alert the other diners to eat while the food is hot. "Unfortunately, it's going to happen," Landry said. "But if you just courteously explain to the server, they should do something to reciprocate." Some restaurants may compensate you with a discounted order or a free dessert.

One important thing, Post says, is if something goes wrong with your dining experience, talk to a manager. "They can fix any issue right then and there."

Whether you are on a date, with friends or family, Post says the purpose of dining etiquette is to further a relationship. "Look up from your plate," she says. "Engage. It's why we're there." The table manners allow for a non-distracting backdrop so guests can enjoy the other main course of dinner – each other's company. ■