

# No teeth picking and other formal dinner rules

The social season is about to begin — no more ribs, corn on the cob or “finger-lickin’-good” grub. Formal dinners are going to be a fact of life if the business person is going to function with panache.

Consider fine dining similar to a grand prix road race. Menus are like maps. There are passing rules, flags and even distance markers, such as salt and pepper shakers, for example. When the shakers are taken away and the cream and sugar arrive, you’ll know dessert will soon follow.

A race begins when the flag drops. You don’t see the entrants starting whenever they feel moved. One must always wait until the host sits before touching anything. Even then, wait until the host or guest of honor lifts a fork before taking a sip of wine or a morsel of food.

The host needs to spend a few minutes beforehand deciding on the lineup, so to speak. The custom is to have the guest of honor to the right of the host, and men and women should alternate positions with as many new people sitting next to each other as possible to enhance conversation.

Many weddings, fund-raisers and company functions have preset menus. It is impolite to ask for substitutes even if you have a severe allergy to the food in front of you. Just push the food around on the plate and eat a lot of something else.

If there is a menu, order what you would like but don’t run off the track. That is, try to stay around the same dollar amount as everyone else, and don’t order

Russian caviar and vodka when everyone else is ordering soup, salad and a beer. Try to get a feeling for what everyone else is eating by asking questions like: “Have you been here before?” “What would you recommend?”

As the host, you can guide your guest into a more comfortable position by suggesting the shrimp cocktail and the dinner salad with the tomato vinaigrette, and so on. That also helps the uncertain guest know what they might feel comfortable ordering.

Besides being the route guide, the host also is the referee and the timekeeper. The event should run smoothly. Make sure the waiter takes the order in a timely fashion. Check with your guests to see if they need another cocktail, then signal the waiter for assistance. If the waiter has disappeared before dessert and you feel anxiety building because you have a guest that needs to be at the airport, go and find the waiter. Do whatever needs to be done to make your guests comfortable.

Pit crews are tool experts. They wouldn’t use a Phillip’s head screwdriver in a straight groove screw. It is just as specific with the use of table implements. So, if the wrong fork for a salad is chosen, it won’t affect the taste, but it could



## BUSINESS ETIQUETTE

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- A Service plate
- B Soup bowl on a liner plate
- C Salad plate
- D Water glass
- E Wine glass
- F Wine glass
- G Salad fork
- H Dinner fork
- I Dessert fork
- J Knife
- K Teaspoon
- L Soup spoon
- M Napkin
- N Cup and saucer

Usually, the easiest way to deal with flatware is to think from the outside in to the center. In a completely outfitted table setting, a tiny cocktail fork might be found to the farthest left. Then you may see a short fork which will be for salad. Third, a larger fork which is the dinner or main course fork. The small fork to the right of the main course fork is a dessert fork.

But you could get confused if there is a fork and a spoon just above the plate in front of you. If that is the case, use that for dessert, because there won’t be a small fork to the inside of the main course fork. Sometimes you will see the tiny cocktail fork above the plate. If this seems tricky, it would be wise to know the menu to be sure what the different courses will be.

If there is to be soup, on the far right you will find a larger spoon than a teaspoon. If the spoon is sort of round and not oval like a tablespoon, it means there will be a cream soup, and if it is large

and oval it will just be a different kind of soup. (No slurping, ever, please!) Moving to the left, the dessert and coffee spoons will follow, unless the spoon for the dessert is above the plate.

If the butter knife is not on the bread-and-butter plate, then it would come next, followed by the fish knife. Fish knives and forks have a different shape than ordinary dinner knives. The forks may be ornately etched and have a much larger blade and bowl area, and they don’t look like they would be much good for cutting tenderloin or eating spaghetti. They are used for the fish course. The last large knife in from the right would be the regular dinner knife.

When you have finished eating, put the knife and fork together on the plate with the sharp part of the blade facing toward the center of the plate. Soup spoons belong inside the bowl, while dessert spoons alongside the dish on the liner plate. Incidentally, flatware does not get saved to be used from course to course.

Smokers beware: No ashtrays on the table means you are not welcome to smoke. It does not mean your host was negligent, forcing you to be adaptive and use a coffee saucer to correct the oversight.

Extinguishing cigarettes in coffee saucers and dessert plates is close to one of the most tasteless activities I have ever seen. It is completely unacceptable behavior. It ranks right up there with audible chewing or smacking noises while eating, talking with food still in mouth, picking teeth and putting Neanderthal arms on the table.

It is not acceptable to tuck a dinner napkin into the collar for an entire meal. If ties or silk dresses need protecting, the proper etiquette is to discreetly raise the napkin with the left hand to chest level when you use your fork or spoon.

Once you are seated, immediately put your napkin on your lap. The large, 23-inch napkins stay folded in half, while the small, 16-inch luncheon size napkins are opened completely. And ladies, if it is a sexist remark to tell you “no lipstick smears,” then gentlemen, that goes for you too!

If it is necessary to leave the table before the end of the meal, simply put the napkin on your chair. Never put the soiled napkin on the table until the meal is completed.

At the meal’s end, it would be very rude to plunk a linen napkin on top of melted ice cream in your dessert plate. Instead fold the napkin to look like a collapsed parachute and place it to the left of the dessert plate.

Glassware is a little easier because the waiter usually fills each one as it is needed.

Side thoughts: Don’t help the waiter clear. Don’t push your plates around on the table. Don’t stack your plates. Don’t light your cigarette with the candle. Don’t use a toothpick at the table. Don’t polish your shoes with the tablecloth. Do go read a book if most of this is completely new for you.

The bottom line: Some things you are born with, but you can learn proper table etiquette. And the race bet: More deals are made over meals than any other sport. □

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