

PROFESSIONAL DINING ETIQUETTE

The pressure knowing that a hiring decision could rest partially on your dinner performance is anxiety producing! A keen mind, good appearance, and nice personality will not outweigh poor table manners. An invitation to a meal means that you are under strong consideration, and, by extension, intense scrutiny. Your social graces and general demeanor at the table can tell as much about you as your answer to a question.

Whether you are at a dinner party, conducting an interview or exploring a new culture, being familiar with the rules of dining etiquette can help to increase your professionalism in unfamiliar situations. Most interviewees think that the meal is a time to relax and chat it up with your interviewer, however, this could not be further from the point. When an organization hosts a meal during an interview, they are assessing how you conduct yourself, your knowledge of etiquette and standard dining practices, and they are also looking to see how you will conduct yourself when meeting with clients and higher-ups in the company. By reviewing the dining etiquette basics below, you'll be able to breeze through an interview meal and increase your desirability to the company.

Some tips to get you started...

Before the Meal

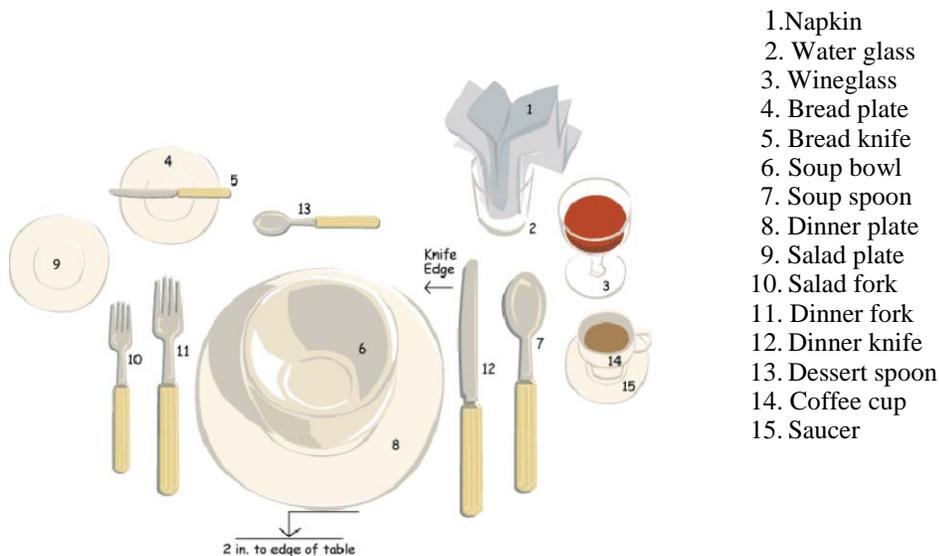
- Arrive at least 10 minutes early - never show up late. Allow for a “freshening-up” visit to the restroom. A crooked tie, a button undone, a belt that is not centered, mussed hair, or an open fly is disastrous.
- Dress according to the invitation or suggestion by the host. If no dress code is indicated, ask before the event or assume business professional.
- Turn off all cell phones, pagers, and beepers.
- Wait for the interviewer to ask you to sit down before taking your seat. If they do not ask, wait for him/her to be seated, then sit.
- Place items such as purses, handbags, umbrellas, keys, or personal items under the table.

Posture

- Sit up straight; do not slouch or lean over the table.
- Your feet should rest flat on the floor; not crossed or wrapped around the chair legs.
- Do not rock back in the chair.
- Elbows on the table are only acceptable between courses when there is no plate in front of you. When you are not eating, keep your hands on your lap.

Table Setting

Understanding a table setting is the first step to becoming a pro at dining etiquette.



The place setting serves much like the road map for your meal. When you sit down, you can look at the way the table is set to figure out what courses you will be eating and which beverages will be offered. To help you navigate your place setting, simply remember these basic rules of thumb:

- Utensils are arranged in the order a person will use them—work your way from the outside in. The salad knife and fork (or the soup spoon if soup is served) will be used first, then you will move towards the plate and continue with the main course by using your dinner knife and fork. If dessert is ordered, you will then use your dessert fork and spoon located horizontally above the main plate. Remember the order BMW—bread plate on the left, main course in the middle, and your water glass is on the right.
- Do not finger or rearrange the silverware or glassware.
- Never wave your fork or knife around or use as props.
- Never place used silverware back on the table.
- If a piece of silverware falls on the floor, do not go fishing for it. Simply scoot it under the table and discretely ask the server bring you another one.

Napkins

- The napkin should be folded and placed on your lap with the fold towards you. When you first sit down for the meal, wait for the host/hostess to place his or her napkin on their lap before you do the same.
- Never tuck the napkin into your clothing, either at the waist or chin.
- If a napkin falls on the floor, politely ask the server to bring you another one.
- The napkin is used to blot your mouth, not serious wiping, and never for blowing your nose. If you must blow your nose, please excuse yourself from the table.
- For ladies, if you are concerned about your lipstick coming off on your napkin, blot it with a tissue before you come to the table. Lipstick on napkins or glasses is very unattractive.
- If you need to excuse yourself from the table, leave your napkin on the seat of your chair or folded and placed to the left of your plate. Never ball up a napkin and toss it on the table.
- When the meal is over, loosely fold your napkin put it to the left of your place setting. The most appropriate time to do this is as everyone is rising from the table.

Food & Beverage

- Order simple foods that are easily eaten with a fork and a knife. Avoid awkward, messy, or exotic foods. It is best not to order finger foods or anything with bones.
- Don't order the most expensive items on the menu. If you aren't sure which price range to adhere to, follow the lead of the host.
- Do not change your order once it is made, and never send the food back.
- If you have allergies or food restrictions and if you know in advance the restaurant where you will be dining, look up the menu and make a list of possible foods that will not hinder your allergy or dietary restrictions. If you are served food that you cannot eat, eat what you can and leave the rest on your plate. Remember to be discrete, as health issues are not to be discussed while dining.
- There are many reasons to avoid alcohol at interview meals. The most important reason is that alcohol fuzzes your mind and you need to keep your wits about you. Order something non-alcoholic, even if the interviewer orders alcohol.
- Do not drink from your glass with food in your mouth. Opening your mouth with food in it and possibly leaving remnants on/in the glass is unsightly.
- The water is for sipping, not for washing down your food.
- Chewing ice at the table or spitting it back in the glass is not acceptable adult business behavior.
- Order coffee or tea after the main course.
- If you do not wish to drink coffee or tea, simply leave your cup turned down.

During the Meal — The Art of Eating AND Talking

During an interview, you're expected to do a lot of talking. Therefore, when you are at a meal interview, you may feel pressured to talk so much you don't get a chance to eat your food. You should not solve this problem by talking with your mouth full. Instead, come to the interview armed with some questions to ask the interviewer. This will allow you to eat while listening to their answers and also shows that you have done your homework!

- You may begin eating when the host/hostess picks up their utensils.
- Remember that business meals are not about the food—they are about business first.
- Be polite to serving staff, make eye contact and say “excuse me” to get their attention as needed, and “please and thank you”.
- Take small bites and never speak with food in your mouth. If a question is asked of you mid-bite, take a moment to chew and swallow your food. It is better to speak after a few seconds than to immediately blurt out your answer with a mouth full of food.
- Pace your eating. Pay attention to how fast or slow the other diners are eating so you do not finish way ahead of them or lag behind.
- Never chew with your mouth open or make loud noises when you eat.
- If a piece of food happens to slip off your plate, discreetly place it back on the corner of your plate. If it is a small piece of food or salad, leave it where it is.
- Always pass salt and pepper shakers together. They are married and should always come in a pair. Do not salt your food before first tasting it. Never use salt and pepper yourself before passing it.
- Do not blow on your food. If food is too hot to eat, let it sit until it cools.
- Spoon soup away from you when you take it out of the bowl and sip from the side of the spoon. When you have finished the soup, always place the spoon on the saucer under the soup bowl.
- If someone decides to claim your bread plate, let it go. It is NEVER good manners to point out someone else's lack of manners (unless you are a mom and you are at home).
- Bread should be eaten in bite-sized pieces. Tear off one small bite-size piece and butter only the piece you are preparing to eat. If a loaf of bread is served, the person the loaf is sitting in front of should cover the loaf with a clean napkin before cutting and pass the loaf to the right.
- Cut lettuce with your knife if necessary. Be careful with the cherry tomato—pierce it gently and cut it before placing in your mouth.
- Do not use lipstick, makeup, floss, combs, or toothpicks at the table.
- Do not push plates away or stack empty plates when finished.
- Never ask for a doggy bag. It will be awkward to carry around back at the office.
- Where you place your utensils on your plate indicates whether you are resting between bites or have finished eating and are waiting for your plate to be removed.
 - If you are **resting** between bites, place your knife horizontally at the top of your plate, blade facing in. Your fork is placed in the lower right hand portion of your plate.
 - To indicate that you are **done eating**, bring the knife down to rest beside the fork in the lower right hand corner of your plate.

Conversation

- Engage in table conversation that is pleasant but entirely free of controversial subjects.
- Never tell jokes. You never know who you could offend.
- Use this time to network. Talk about hobbies and interests.
- Begin discussing business after a rapport has been established and meal has been ordered.

Finishing Out

Ending an in-office interview usually involves thanking the interviewer; however, a meal interview is slightly different. First, remember that you do not have to offer to pay for the meal. It is almost never expected of you as a candidate. Rather, you should thank the interviewer for the meal and express how much you enjoyed talking to him/her. Also, you don't want to forget about the job, so it is a good idea to reaffirm how much you like the company and how much you are interested in the position. And finally, always follow-up with a thank-you note.

In today's competitive environment, dining etiquette is an area of expertise that can be added to your list of career and job search skills. Keep in mind that etiquette rules are not commandments—learn the standards and then apply them as you see fit. These skills will not only serve you well now, but also in the future.

The Golden Rule of Etiquette is that when you are in doubt, discretely watch until others show the way.

This document is intended to assist students in preparing for the interview process and similar business situations. It would be helpful to receive feedback from you about what is or isn't helpful and what else you may be wishing you had direction about. Please email any feedback to teri.rasmussen@usu.edu.