

# When Business Comes to Table, It Pays to Mind Your Ps and Qs

by Roger Mummert

**Savoir-faire.** “To know to do” is the literal translation of this well-used expression for social tact, and the French – who gave us both the phrase and the concept behind it – are conscious of it from the time they don a uniform, toss a strap around their primers and toddle off to *l'école*. In America, where jeans and T-shirts comprise our everyday uniform (and increasingly our business attire), the rules of proper social behavior are considerably less familiar.



Back in the days of Emily Post, it was called *etiquette*. Today, outside of society enclaves where proper demeanor still is taught along with reading and writing, we've largely forgotten the meaning of the word. Etiquette is little more than rules to live by so that everyone is at ease in a social situation – like dining out.

“Good manners equals good business and can boost your career,” says Sue Fox, founder of Etiquette Survival and co-author of *Business Etiquette for Dummies*. “Good etiquette shows that you're civil and can handle yourself with professionalism.”

Proper behavior at a business meal yields several benefits, Fox asserts. It permits you to put your guest (or your host) at ease and to concentrate on being a good representative of your company. Poor behavior, on the other hand, results in loss of respect. Fox reports one instance where a well-qualified job candidate was not hired because of boorish behavior at a restaurant. The job involved a lot of entertaining, and the employer was shocked when the candidate flung his tie back over his shoulder and chowed down. After he came up for air, a drop of salad dressing hung from his chin for the remainder of the meal. “If you're up against other people of equal abilities, table manners can make the difference in whether you're hired or not,” Fox says.

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Fox got her start at Apple in 1984, first working in R&D before moving to the marketing side, where she organized events and where issues of etiquette arose. The

## TIPS FOR GOOD BUSINESS DINING ETIQUETTE

- > **Offer a Client Choice.** Choose two restaurants that you think will appeal to your guest. Check with his or her assistant to see if a person has particular dietary preferences or restrictions. Ask the restaurant for two times. The restaurant should be convenient to your guest, not to you.
- > **Pay Before You Eat.** Arrive early and ask the maitre d' to take your credit card and run it through for pre-approval right away. Sign the receipt, add 18 to 20 percent gratuity and request that a receipt be mailed to you. The bill never appears at the table, so there's no confusion about who pays.
- > **Take the Worst Seat.** Allow your guest to have the best seat. Guests should never sit looking at a mirror or toward the kitchen door.
- > **Maintain Excellent Posture For Dining.** Sit upright and don't support yourself with your forearms or elbows; even though it's tempting, don't rest your head in your hands between courses ... . Avoid flourishing a napkin like a bullfighter: Dab the corners of your mouth; don't wipe off lipstick or blow your nose with it ... . No fidgeting: Don't plink on the table with your cutlery or fidget with the tablecloth or your hair.
- > **Follow the Host.** It's your turn when and only when your host begins to eat. Don't even have a sip of water until your host does.
- > **Know Your Left and Right.** With a formal place setting, the two most important rules are drinks right, bread plate left; and start by using the utensils placed farthest away from the plate and work inward with each course.
- > **Keep the Clock on Your Plate.** In a formal meal, when you finish a course, rest your knife and fork on the plate at an angle that indicates 10:20 o'clock. When resting between courses, do the same but space utensils further apart. Never wave your utensils around like you're conducting an orchestra!
- > **Dip and Move.** In a formal meal, a finger bowl is presented after a main course or before dessert. The bowl, which rests on a doily and plate, contains warm water with a slice of lemon or a small flower. Dip just your fingertips and dry them on your napkin. Remove the doily and bowl and place them to the left. A server will then remove them.

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*From Business Etiquette for Dummies by Sue Fox and Perrin Cunningham, (IDG Books Worldwide, 2001).*

Silicon Valley native now consults to Fortune 500 companies like Texaco and IBM, as well as to New Economy companies like Netscape and Zapa Digital Graphics, where appropriate behavior at business meals and functions needs to be defined ... and often refined.

When asked to grade American business people on their knowledge of and adherence to proper etiquette, Fox laughs and then doles out a "C." Fox offers higher marks ("B" to "B+") to the many foreign-born employees of high-tech companies, for whom she provides courses in etiquette and Western customs. Fox often trains technical hires from India and the Far East who have grown up in British-influenced cultures where notions of appropriate social behavior and communication skills are stressed from an early age.

Traditional American companies see the bottom-line importance of providing employees with training in how to conduct oneself at a business luncheon. New Economy companies are less inclined to invest in such training because they often view their employees as tenuous. However, companies in other countries are far ahead of America in seeing the importance of good demeanor, all in Fox's view.

### **It's Continental**

With the rise of globalization, the importance of understanding cultural differences, especially in table behavior, is heightened further. Europeans for example, grow up with a greater sense of table formality, says Fox. At Etiquette Survival, the "Continental style" of dining is taught, and it makes more sense than the way Americans eat, says Fox. "It's more refined and quite refreshing, although their younger generations are becoming more casual and more relaxed."

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# WINE ETIQUETTE

People with a solid foundation in dining etiquette often wilt at the task of ordering and tasting wine for the table. Unfortunately, wine intimidation is still common at some restaurants that impose a rigid French wine service upon their guests. That's changed over the past several decades, say wine directors at leading restaurants where increasing the enjoyment – and consumption – of wonderful wines can enhance the dining experience.

Formal, ostentatious and pretentious wine service began to disappear 10 years ago, says Larry Stone, head sommelier at Rubicon, a celebrated San Francisco restaurant, whose owners include Francis Ford Coppola, Robert DeNiro, George Lucas and Robin Williams. One reason: Consumers know more about wine. "People are so much more accustomed to having wine every day that wine is no longer just for a special occasion," says Stone.

## Trust the sommelier

When ordering wine, Stone recommends that the diner rely upon the sommelier and not try to show off. "If you see that a restaurant has a great wine program, you should assume they know what they're doing and ask, 'What do you know about this wine?'" Stone advises. "The sommelier is knowledgeable because he or she has tasted their wines more regularly than you have."

Daniel Johnnes, wine director at Montrachet in Manhattan, concurs. Johnnes has built a formidable list that's heavy in Burgundy, where very small lots of wine are made by obscure producers and wholesaled by somewhat more familiar negotiants. "If a customer doesn't know the area very well, it's best to talk to the sommelier, who will ask about their tastes and price preferences and guide them to good choices," recommends Johnnes.

At some high-end restaurants, however, pretension has crept back into wine service. One affectation, skewered by critics, is the practice of "preparing" a wine glass for a treasured wine by "rinsing" each glass with the (expensive!) wine about to be served and then pouring it out.

"Preparing glasses with a rinse of wine is a little pretentious," says Johnnes. At Montrachet, servers prepare glasses by steaming them and wiping them clean to eliminate any residues or lint before setting the table.

The issue of sending back a bottle – a tense situation that a poorly stored or "corked" bottle can legitimately precipitate – comes up but only rarely. At



Montrachet, the sommelier "screens" each wine, taking a small sip before serving the guests.

## Casual winning out

Joshua Wesson, co-CEO of Best Cellars wine shops and former sommelier, sees the casual trend in wine service as a good thing that increases wine appreciation. By design, Best Cellars simplifies the task of purchasing wine, and that same swing toward the simple and informal is happening in restaurants, Wesson says. He cites casual restaurants that serve large carafes of easy drinking wines and then measure consumption by tape measure and charge customers by the inch. Such informality puts the diner at ease, free from worrying about price and demeanor. It also makes money for restaurants by boosting consumption. "Any time you see chain restaurants picking up on trends like that," says Wesson, "you know they're working."

—RM

Many of Fox's American clients reveal that they are ill at ease when having a meal with their more formal Japanese clients. "The Japanese are incredibly polite because their companies provide training in etiquette and business protocols," she stresses.

Fox has her work cut out for her right at home in Silicon Valley. A local newspaper recently proclaimed The Valley "The Rudest Place on Earth," and the area spawns an arrogance born of success that comes early in life. There, as elsewhere in America, people are stressed out from overwork. Misguided anger spills out in such symptoms as road rage, rudeness on the telephone (the eternally ringing cell phone!) and poor behavior at the table, says Fox,

who taps into Buddhist techniques for channeling her own frustrations. "American companies are waking up to the importance of good behavior," says Fox. "They're training their managers first because bad personal behavior trickles down and influences entire departments."

Americans' poor sense of etiquette is a by-product of the "casualization" of America, especially in the way we conduct business, and of the permissive style in which we've raised our children. Many from the Baby Boomer generation, who tied flowers in their hair, bathed infrequently and thumbed their noses at establishment rules, now have children entering the work force, young people with nary a

clue as to social conventions.

No matter the generation, Fox finds no shortage of people in need of her services. She recently sat across from a business lunch where one participant hoisted an expansive leaf of lettuce on her fork and nibbled away, rabbitlike, for half the meal. "I wanted to leave my card," says Fox, "but I don't think that would have helped her immediate cause." ▲

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