

SILVER | Rules about eating cause confusion and even anger

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We're also a nation of immigrants, many of whom who weren't necessarily reared on European-style table settings. These days, the closest we get to a fish knife or a marrow spoon are the rare times we dine at a break-the-bank restaurant.

"That's why people get so confused," says Lisa Mirza Grotts, an etiquette consultant and a former director of protocol for the city and county of San Francisco. "In our society, McDonald's is dining."

Knowing your salad fork from your entree fork, or your bread knife from your steak knife might seem trivial. But in a world where first impressions count, knowledge such as that can sometimes make or break you.

"It's all about power and confidence," says Grotts, director of the AML Group, a San Francisco etiquette consulting firm. "We have rules for everything. For driving. For playing golf. It's all about being socially acceptable, unless you want to be the odd man out and have everyone staring at you."

When it comes to place settings, most people know to work from the outside in when using flatware, that the salad fork is thus set to the left of the entree fork, that the appetizer knife is smaller than the entree knife, and that the water glass is to the right of their plate. But sometimes restaurants can throw even knowledgeable diners for a loop.

At Manresa in Los Gatos, chef-owner David Kinch prefers a modern, minimalist look to his cuisine and place settings. As a result, Manresa probably uses fewer specialized flatware pieces than most restaurants of that caliber.

But at Manresa, when a fork is set on the tablecloth, it is done so with the tines facing down. It's a nod to the European influence that runs through much of Kinch's cuisine.

Two sets of rules

Indeed, there are two main styles of eating: American and European (or Continental). In the American style, the knife is used only for cutting; and the fork is then switched to the right hand to eat, with the tines facing up. In European style, the fork and knife always remain in your hands. The fork is in the left, with the tines facing down, no matter if you are cutting your food or eating off the fork. The knife, which remains in your right hand, also helps push food onto the fork. Either style is appropriate, Grotts says, but once you start with one, it's a major no-no to switch to the other halfway through the meal. (Left-handers, by the way, should do the reverse of right-handers in either style.)

The European method is what the Village Pub's Stannard learned from his British mother and grandmother, who indulged him in his childhood with high teas, and traditional roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. As a result of his upbringing, Stannard has a real fondness for the romance and intricacy of specialized flatware.

"I find that stuff endlessly fascinating," he says. "At the Village Pub, we use salad knives, salad forks, oyster forks, demitasse spoons for espresso, and mother-of-pearl spoons for caviar. We don't use fish knives or sauce spoons, even though I would like to, because most people today don't know how to use them or what they are for."

When pressed, though, even experts such as Stannard and Grotts acknowledge that the correct use of the sauce spoon might elude even them. Stannard assumes it's for pushing a morsel of food with sauce onto your fork, while Grotts has seen it used in only the traditional way

with dessert, not in the more contemporary style with savory courses.

For the ultimate authority, I looked to the French Laundry in Yountville, a restaurant whose multi-course tasting menus dictate probably more specialized flatware and plates than any other restaurant around. According to its managers, there are three uses for the sauce spoon: One, as a spoon to put a thick sauce or puree into your mouth; two, as a ladle to put sauce on meat or fish; and three, as a knife to cut very soft foods such as boeuf bourguignon.

Cause for resentment

No wonder diners get bewildered. And sometimes even peeved.

"That's one thing about having a lot of silverware," says Bart Hosmer, executive chef of Parcel 104 in Santa Clara. "You're basically telling the guest how to eat. And some guests resent that."

Parcel 104 uses about 25 flatware pieces regularly — everything from chopsticks for sushi to shellfish crackers for crab and lobster to fish knives and fish forks to handcrafted French Laguiole steak knives with polished wood handles, exclusively for VIP tables.

"Sometimes I'll put down a cocktail fork," says Parcel 104 server John Orrock, "and the guest will say, 'What's this? Can't I have a real fork?'"

At the Village Pub, when two diners are enjoying a middle course, the chef will send out an *amuse* so the other guests at the table have something to eat, too. Often times, it will be a demitasse of soup.

"The cups have handles, and the waiters will explain that you just pick it up and sip," Stannard says. "But some people will say, 'That's stupid.' I mean, first off, we're sending something to you for free. But they get angry and demand a spoon. So I bring an espresso spoon and think, 'How long is it going to take you to eat this with an espresso spoon? Yeah, have fun with that.'"

Flatware that's so refined has become an indulgence in which few restaurants want to invest. First, it's expensive. To add to its flatware collection or to replace items, Parcel 104 estimates it spends \$10,000 a year. After all, pieces do go missing. Servers or busboys can accidentally toss them into the garbage while cleaning off plates or inadvertently wrap them up in soiled tablecloths that get sent to the cleaners. Second, such pieces demand a lot of care. Each day, Hosmer says, three or four of his servers spend an hour polishing them.

Tools for guidance

Why go to such trouble? Because it educates diners. For instance, serving a marrow spoon with osso bucco lets them know they can eat the marrow in the bones. Specialized silverware also makes eating certain foods easier and more pleasurable, and it elevates the service to a more sophisticated level.

"Most people just care if it's clean," Hosmer says of the flatware. "But there's an expectation when you go to a Gary Danko or to a French Laundry that you'll have the proper silverware. Without it, the dining experience just wouldn't be complete."

In fact, Parcel 104 once used even more flatware. But there was one small problem. Some diners grew a little too fond of the stylish Illy espresso spoons and pocketed them.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

Lisa Mirza Grotts offers etiquette seminars. For more information, go to www.amlgroup.com or call (415) 398-3229.

Contact Carolyn Jung at (408) 920-5451 or cjung@mercurynews.com. Fax (408) 271-3786.

Ins and outs of flatware and place settings:

Remember the rule, "Work from the outside in." Think of your plate as a clock. Use the flatware farthest from the sides of your plate first, at the 9 o'clock and 3 o'clock positions, working your way closer to the plate with each subsequent course.

If there is flatware placed at the top of your plate, at 12 o'clock, use those pieces last, as they are typically for dessert and coffee.

To signal to your waiter that you are finished with a course, place your knife and fork across the plate at the 4 o'clock position, with the tines and top of the knife pointed toward the 12, and the handles pointed toward the 4.

There are two styles of eating: American and Continental. In the American style, the knife is used only for cutting; and the fork is then switched to the right hand to eat with the tines facing up. In Continental (or European) style, the fork always remains in the left hand, with the tines facing down, whether you are cutting your food or eating from the fork. The only exceptions are slippery foods such as peas, which are eaten with the tines up. The knife remains in the right hand to cut food or to help push food onto the tines of the fork.

When eating soup, remember to spoon it away from you, not toward you.

Your bread plate is to the left of your main plate. Your water glass is to the right of your main plate.

Some say it's OK to put elbows on the table between courses when there is no food in front of you. Others say you should never prop them on the table.

When in doubt, ask. If you're unsure which piece of flatware to use or how to use a particular one, ask a waiter or someone seated at your table.

Want your own marrow spoons or oyster forks to use at home? Your best bet is to comb antique stores, estate sales, and online sites. Tiffany's stores also will do special orders or custom orders of unusual flatware pieces. Gump's in downtown San Francisco does special orders, too.

Sources: Carolyn Jung; Lisa Mirza Grotts, certified etiquette consultant in San Francisco; Tim Stannard, proprietor of the Village Pub in Woodside; the French Laundry management in Yountville.

WHAT'S THAT?

Caviar spoon: Made from mother-of-pearl, which doesn't impart a metallic taste to the precious fish eggs, as stainless steel or silver would.

Fish knife: An offset knife used to delicately cut into fish; used with a **fish fork**, which is slightly smaller than the entree fork.

Marrow spoon: A very narrow spoon on a long handle used to dig out and eat the buttery rich marrow from inside cooked bones, such as in osso bucco.

Oyster fork: A short, wide fork with three or four tines used for eating oysters on the half shell.

Sauce spoon: When used for dessert, the flat paddle-like spoon can be used to sip from or to ladle sauce on a sweet morsel. These days, it's more commonly set at the table with a knife and fork for a savory course. It has three uses. One, as a spoon to put a thick sauce or puree into your mouth; two, as a ladle to put sauce on meat or fish; and three, as a knife to cut into very soft foods such as boeuf bourguignon.

— Carolyn Jung



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS

What are they?

These old pieces of flatware aren't likely to be found in today's silverware drawers.

From left, they are:

1. Toast fork. This may look like a miniature version of Neptune's trident, but this fork was a necessity at the Victorian breakfast table. In those days, you wouldn't even consider using your fingers to snag a slice of toast from the serving plate. This example was once owned by Hollywood director George Cukor.

2. Lettuce fork. While this fork appears to be a formidable weapon, it was a necessary tool in the Victorian and Edwardian eras. When assembling a sandwich, for example, there would be serving plates and implements for ingredi-

ents such as tomatoes, meats, lettuce and bread.

3. Bacon fork. The longer handle on this item identifies it as a piece used to dish up bacon. Similar-looking forks with shorter handles were for serving sardines.

4. Corn holder, one of a pair. These implements were used to hold an ear of buttery, salted corn. Soiled hands were forbidden in the dining room. These were in vogue long before the ubiquitous plastic corn-shaped holders in use today. (This version of a corn holder looks similar to a mango fork, but the center tine of a mango fork is longer.)

— Steven Wayne Yvaska

ANTIQUES | Gilded Age gave silverware new prominence

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banquet given by a prominent hostess.

Once members of an ever-growing middle class heard about the dining rituals of the upper crust, they yearned to emulate them.

Regional food delicacies eventually dictated the need for specialized implements. Lobster forks and picks became a necessity in East Coast dining rooms. In the South, crawfish knives and terrapin forks were de rigeur. Faster methods of transportation and inventions — such as the refrigerated boxcar — made it possible for exotic foods to be shipped inland. Before long, citrus spoons, oyster forks and orange knives were as necessary in St. Louis and Chicago as in Charleston or New Orleans.

As the growing middle class heard about rituals of the upper crust, they yearned to emulate them.

This glittering epoch began

to tarnish with the onset of World War I. And within the next several years, as taxes on the wealthy were broadened to support the war effort, it came to a crashing halt. The nation's spending habits changed drastically. Most of these utensils were relegated to the attic or the dark recesses of a pantry.

Over the past few years, there has been renewed interest in these relics. Food lovers scour flea markets, antiques stores, thrift shops and estate sales for vintage examples. Although some pieces may bewilder us, they are as functional today as they were generations ago.

Contact Steven Wayne Yvaska at svyaska@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5986. Fax (408) 288-8060.

About the cover photos

The "Now" and "Then" photos on our cover are designed to display some of the more unusual modern and older pieces. Neither is an exact representation of a place setting you'd be likely to encounter.

In the "Then" photo, a selection of flatware, circa 1880-

1920, was arranged by size.

The "Now" photo shows the flatware in its correct places, but it would be extremely rare to see so many forks and knives set out all at once. These days, it's more common for the table to be reset after each course with the proper flatware. We also chose not to

show many spoons, so that we could emphasize some of the more distinctive pieces used today instead.

— Carolyn Jung

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