

Avoiding Dining Disasters



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The dining table is many things. It is a proving ground where the citizen diplomat strengthens relationships through gracious interaction with new or existing friends. It is a stage where the savvy business person demonstrates confidence, sophistication, and good manners. Or, it can be the site of a disaster.

One of the most sensitive etiquette areas is how to handle new or exotic foods, especially in the context of developing relationships with colleagues from another culture. These *Questions and Answers* hit the high – and low – points of gracefully dealing with a dinner that might be looking back at you.

Question: What should I do when my host serves an unfamiliar or exotic food that I have never eaten?

Answer: Do your best to taste the new delicacy. In some countries, a guest is considered rude if he doesn't try food being served. If you just can't eat the dish, then push it around your plate as if you were eating it. Cover it up with other food.

Question: Is it permissible to talk about food likes and dislikes at the table?

Answer: In a word – NO! Fall back on Mom's advice. If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all. Explaining that something is too fattening, too strange, or too disgusting is never acceptable. Saying that something is delicious is A-OK.

Question: How should food allergies be handled?

Answer: Carefully! Having a guest taken away by an ambulance puts a damper on any event. If you have allergies, talk to your host before the event. If there is any possibility that a dish may contain an ingredient you are allergic to, ask your server to talk with the chef. Nicely explain that you cannot risk eating the food in question.

Question: What is the proper way to remove something from your mouth?

Answer: This last ditch approach should be reserved for gristle or bones that you can't chew. Never remove food into your napkin. Take the item out of your mouth with your thumb and index finger and place it on the edge of your plate.

Question: What should you do when you have requested a special meal at a function due to dietary or religious restrictions, but receive foods that are taboo for you.

Answer: Signal your server. Quietly explain the problem and request food you can eat. Good restaurants and hotels strive to keep guests happy.



These are foods you are likely to encounter at a business lunch or dinner. They are also challenging to eat correctly.

Bread and Butter: Break off only one bite-sized piece of your bread or roll at a time, then butter and eat it. Don't pull the roll in half. Do the buttering on your plate, never in midair. When butter is passed, place a portion onto your butter plate with the butter server. If pats are used, pick them up with the serving fork provided and place on your plate. If a serving fork isn't provided, use your butter spreader.

Celery, Olives, Pickles, and Radishes: These foods are taken from the serving tray with the fingers and placed on the side of your dinner plate or bread and butter plate. Celery and radishes may be dipped in salt and eaten with the fingers. Large olives with a pit are eaten in several bites. Discard the pit on the side of the plate. Small stuffed olives are eaten whole.

Fruit: Bananas eaten at the table are peeled and eaten with a knife and fork. If you eat a banana away from the table, peel it down as you eat it. Berries are eaten with a spoon. Large strawberries served with the stem are held by the stem, dipped in sugar, and eaten in one or two bites. Discard the stem on the side of the plate. Grapes are eaten by pulling a small portion away from the large bunch with a knife or scissors, and then placed in the mouth one at a time.

Pasta: (Spaghetti) Use a fork and separate a few strands. Hold the tip of the prongs against the plate and twirl the fork around to gather the strands onto it. Don't stir and don't use a spoon. Small-sized pasta such as tortellini or penne is eaten with a fork.

Pizza: Pizza is cut into wedges. Use your fingers to pick up the wider end of the wedge. You may fold the pizza in the center to keep edges curved inward to prevent the toppings from dripping. Pizza may also be cut into bite-sized pieces and eaten with a fork.

Water: Blot your mouth before taking a drink. Do not drink water while food is in the mouth, roll water around in your mouth, or swallow loudly. Do not forcefully drain an entire glassful. Hold a tumbler-type glass near the bottom, a small stem glass by the stem, and large goblets at the bottom of the bowl. Always set your glass back on the table to the right of your plate.

Bon Appétit!



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