

MISS MANNERS

Nonnegotiable at the Table

By Judith Martin

It's a sad commentary on the state of modern manners that the dinner table is regarded less as a succulent scene than as a social booby trap.

Miss Manners sometimes ponders such a question herself, but only in regard to the food. Between today's adventurous cooks and analytical eaters, there's some weird-looking stuff appearing.

Everything else on the table is just equipment to eat it with, along with a few decorative touches. That shouldn't be frightening. It's designed to feed you, not test you. And it's supposed to be appetizing, not off-putting.

This is why although originality counts, it usually counts against. Digestion being a complicated enough process, everything on the table should be decipherable.

It is all very well to spend hours constructing centerpiece of tiny golf courses with living grass, or chase scenes made more to be said for flowers, and even more for fruit, which can be eaten afterward, or even instead of the sweet dessert.

Candlesticks should appear only after dark, when their presence is explicable. Napkin rings, however whimsical, should be used when necessary to identify napkins for reuse.

As trays now serve the purpose of dividing the diners into opposing, enraged camps, which is why they have entered peacetime service as candy or nut dishes. Menu stands, however, should have a new lease on life, as they enable people to forage for food to which they have no moral, religious, medical or philosophical objections.

In the basic setting, you probably know that the plate in front of you and the napkin on it are yours. But there seems to be some confusion about what is farther afield, and one person going in the wrong direction can throw off an entire table.

The flatware issue is the emotional one, Miss Manners realizes, although she has never understood why. Most pieces give at least a hint of their function—the salad fork has a cutting edge on the side, and the fish knife has a bone-picking point on the end—but in any case, they are all sensibly lined up in the order they should be used.

Forbes are put on the left, in strict outside-to-inside order of use; their matching knives are in the same order to the right, and first course utensils—soup spoons or oyster forks—are to the right of the knives.

So what's the problem? People who run out of silver prematurely don't arouse the hostess's scorn—only the worry that she set the table wrong, or that she should install a metal detector by the door as the guests leave.

As for sneering waiters, there should be some relief in knowing that restaurant tables are inevitably set wrong, because the waiters cannot know in advance what the diners will be eating.

Besides, restaurants are sadly deficient in fish knives, and they succumb to a peculiar but widespread teaspoon fetish—the belief that every place setting requires one, and that it can be used instead of a larger soup or dessert spoon.

However, there are only two simple things one needs to manage any restaurant meal correctly. One is the knowledge that big utensils are used for main courses and small ones for small courses; and the other is the courage to summon a waiter and say, "I don't believe I have a fork for this," even if the reason is that you dropped it on the floor.

Miss Manners hopes she has made all this sound as easy as pleasant eating should be. But not so much so that the concept of practicality is thrown back in her face, an unseemly procedure at table.

No, no, no—you cannot put mustard jars, pickle bottles, cream containers, packages of crackers, boxes of cereal, plastic honey or syrup bottles, take-home covered food trays, Chinese carry-out cartons, pizza boxes or any other commercial container on any table, even a breakfast table.

Never mind that this is the fast, sensible, easy, practical way to serve things. Miss Manners has been talking about setting a table, not a trough.

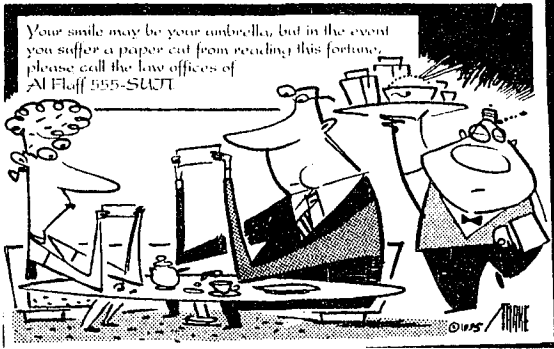
The Style Invitational

WEEK 102: HELP! I'M A PRISONER IN THIS CONTEST

You will win the lottery, and then die. Your lucky numbers are 12, 23, 9, 38, 17 and 40.

This restaurant never serves cat meat. To our knowledge.

You must find the jade monkey to save the Pu Ping Dynasty.



Your smile may be your undoing, but in the event you suffer a paper cut from reaching this feature, please call the law offices of APLAFF 555-5427.

This Week's Contest was suggested by Joseph Romm, of Washington, who wins a picture of a really fat guy, and simultaneously by Bill Steinmetz, 13, of McLean. Bill wins a fabulous 1965 Pickett slide rule.

102, The Washington Post, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071, fax them to 202-334-4312, or submit them via the Internet to this address: losers@access.digex.net.

REPORT FROM WEEK 99

in which you were asked to find what was wrong with any of three pictures.

◆ Third Runner-Up: (Picture A) Although the tuba is stuffed with a man's torso, the little notes indicate that the player is making musical sounds somehow. You people are absolutely disgusting.

◆ Second Runner-Up (Picture B) No pitchfork. (Linda K. Malcolm, Silver Spring)

◆ First Runner-Up (Picture B): I never really cared for Hillary's personal style during the Arkansas years. (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

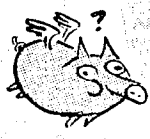
◆ And the winner of the copper outhouse music box: (Picture B) After having posed 30 straight days for the great artist, the woman seemed serene and surprisingly free of infections. (George Wills, Blacksburg)



Detail from A



B



Detail from A



Picture B:

There is a pig flying. As the Style Invitational has yet to show a sign of good taste, pigs should not have flown yet.

The newsboy cannot be selling The Washington Post, because the headline would be "Feds Register Concern Over Beverage Ramifications."

Insert credit line to avoid artist's lawsuit: BY LEONARDO DA VINCI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST. (Ken Krattenmaker, Landover Hills)

The cabbie in the lower right-hand corner speaks fluent English (Kurt Beals, Staunton) No one has any feet. Shoe City would have folded months ago. (Ken Krattenmaker, Landover Hills)

And Last: (All pictures) They're damp, smeared and torn. You tell the delivery person to wrap my Sunday paper in one of those damn plastic bags or I cancel my subscription. (John Kammer, Herndon)

Next Week: The Joke's On You

Horoscope

By Sydney Omarr
Aries (March 21-April 19): Reflect on achievement, prepare to take cold plunge into future.

Virgo (Aug. 23-Sept. 22): Revise, review, rebuild, let others know you will fight if cause is right.

Aquarius (Jan. 20-Feb. 18): It's finished! Avoid being trapped by petty annoyances, red tape—give attention to current project that could open markets overseas.

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