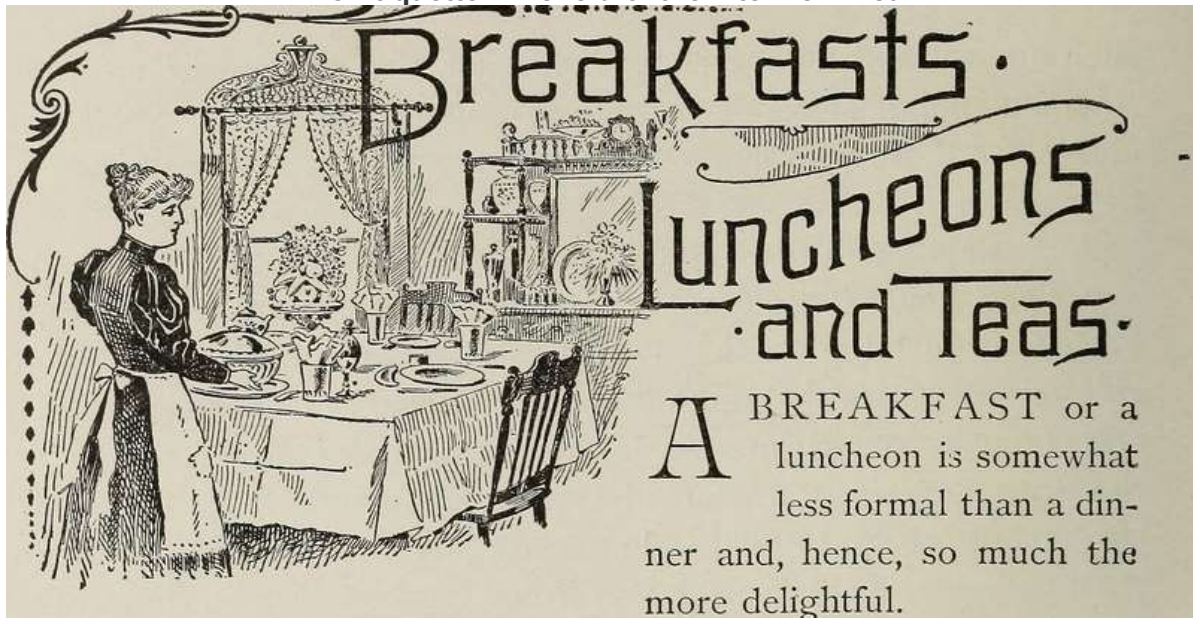




The Etiquette Minefield of the Interview Meal



November 9, 2015 [Image](#): page from "Twentieth century culture and deportment, or, The lady and gentleman at home and abroad: containing rules of etiquette for all occasions," 1899 (National Publishing Co., Library of Congress)

As you prepare for the job market you are undoubtedly focusing on your research, polishing your job market paper, and honing your presentation skills. Those absolutely should be your highest priorities. However, when you have time, you should also be sure to brush up on your dining etiquette. It can save you stress and embarrassment later.

When you visit a campus to give a job talk, your hosts will take you to a nice restaurant and you may be confronted with etiquette issues that you rarely face. During graduate school your typical meal may consist of eating pizza off a paper plate while watching PowerPoint slides in a lunchtime seminar, but now you'll need to be polished and professional during a multicourse dinner.

At one recruitment dinner I attended, after the waiter brought a bottle of wine to the table, the candidate picked it up first and filled his glass to the brim -- then looked on, visibly embarrassed, as everyone else filled their wine glasses only partway. You don't want to feel ashamed or out of place when you should be fully engaged with your dinner companions.

For guidance on this front, I sought the help of Alex Susskind, an associate professor in Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration and a hospitality industry expert who teaches business-etiquette seminars. Below is a summary of his best practices for the interview dinner.

The Preliminaries:

- Be on time.
- Practice good grooming -- men should shave.
- Turn off your mobile phone and do not use it at all during dinner.
- Say your name when you introduce yourself to someone, and shake hands.

Immediately After Sitting:

- First, put your napkin on your lap.
- Know which bread plate and glasses are yours. A good mnemonic device: Make "OK" signs with both hands. Your left hand makes a b -- the left side of the table is where your bread plate is. The right hand makes a d -- that side is where your drinking glasses are.
- Know which silverware to use. For both forks and knives, work from the outside in. A dessert utensil may be placed horizontally at the top of the place setting.

Bread basics:

- Offer common foods on the table (e.g. bread, appetizers) to others first before you help yourself.
- Do not spread butter on your bread with the communal knife; use the one at your place setting.
- Butter only an individual bite of bread; do not butter entire slices at a time.

Conversation:

- Research your companions prior to the dinner, and bring two to three talking points for each of them. You should have something to discuss about the research of each person, and you could also discuss issues related to their teaching and alma mater.
- There are three things you should never talk about: religion, politics, and sex. Just because other people open the door to those subjects doesn't mean you should walk through it. Hold your tongue and discreetly change the subject.
- Never talk with food in your mouth.
- In the old days, men would stand when a female guest stood to leave the table. A man should not do this today -- it might signal that he has anachronistic gender views and that he would treat women differently in other ways as well.
- Elbows on the table are only forbidden while eating. After the table has been cleared, when you are in repose and chatting, it is fine to put your elbows on the table.

Wine:

- Your hosts may ask if you'd like to choose the wine. Don't feel pressured to do so. In fact, unless you're a wine expert, you should probably decline. It's highly likely that someone there has strong preferences and will be eager to choose.
- In many cases, the waitstaff will refill your wine glass. That may make it hard for you to gauge how much alcohol you have consumed. Be careful you do not overindulge.
- If you're filling your own wine glass, fill it no higher than a third of the way up.

Food:

- Order food that's easy to eat. Do not order messy foods, such as lobster, crab legs, French onion soup, or pasta.
- Also err on the safe side and order familiar food. It would be awkward to send the food back because you don't like it, or to eat very little of it, attracting the attention of your hosts.
- Wait until everyone has received their food before you start to eat. In general, don't be the first to eat.

Alex closed with his adaptation of [Emily Post's Top Ten Table Manners](#):

1. Chew with your mouth closed.
2. Don't making slurping, smacking, or other eating noises.
3. Don't hold your fork in your fist.
4. Don't pick your teeth with a fingernail, toothpick, or floss (even if behind your hand).
5. Put your napkin in your lap after you sit down.
6. Wait until you're done chewing before you take a drink.
7. Cut your food one piece at a time (not all at once).
8. Don't slouch over the place setting or put your elbows on the table while eating.
9. Don't use the "boardinghouse reach" -- ask to have things passed to you.
10. Say "excuse me" when you leave the table.

A few final thoughts:

- There may be times during dinner when your hosts will talk amongst themselves about departmental matters. While you might feel ignored, and perhaps anxious that you are a boring dinner companion, don't panic. This happens often and is no reflection on you. Just politely listen and participate when it feels natural.
- Be polite and courteous to waiters and waitresses. No matter how nice you are to the interviewers, if you are rude to support staff no one will think you're a nice person.
- After dinner, your hosts may ask you first if you want dessert or coffee. It's hard to know if your companions are hoping you'll say yes (so it's more socially acceptable for them to order some, too) or no (because they're tired and want to go home). Say what you truly think, but also indicate that you're flexible.

This is the sixth installment of [Job Market Mentor](#), a regular feature on Vitae. Send your questions to JobMarketMentor@gmail.com. Contributors will be kept anonymous. You can also follow this column on Twitter: [@JobMarketMentor](#).