



Table Etiquette for lawyers

"A Man's Manners are a Mirror in which He Shows his Portrait."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

As a law student I was actually taken aback by the idea of having to dine three times before being successfully called to the bar. Law dinners are a serious affair and you have to be dressed formally and arrive on time if not you stand the risk of being locked out. I pondered on the significance of dining for members of the legal profession, and I realised that it is a relic of our colonial heritage, to become a barrister in England and Wales you have to attend twelve formal dinners. Alex Aldridge, a British writer who specialises in Law and Education clarifies that dining is a medieval ritual that has its roots in the days when the inns (Inner Temple, Middle Temple, Lincoln's Inn and Gray's Inn) were responsible for vocational legal education. "Sons of country gentleman" from across the country would come to lodge with them, attending lectures, taking part in mock courts and dining together in the inns' main halls." It also occurred to me that in our dealings as lawyers we would have to dine with non-lawyers, clients and other members of the profession therefore learning proper table etiquette is fundamental to being a successful lawyer. PJ McGuire, founder of Modét, a Chicago-based consulting company specialising in modern business etiquette and protocols, social interaction skills and executive coaching is of the opinion that, good etiquette can help create a positive impression on clients and colleagues while poor etiquette can harm your image, lead to embarrassing situations and even scupper a business deal. She notes that "Etiquette is part of your professional presence and can reflect how you want to be perceived." We should constantly remind ourselves of the rules of table etiquette some of these will be discussed below.

Rules of Table Etiquette

Debrett A British website on Etiquette suggests these basic rules of table manners:

Napkins should be placed on the lap as soon as you are seated. When you get down from the table, leave the napkin, unfolded on the table, to the left of the place setting. Sit a comfortable distance away from the table, so that with the elbows bent the hands are level with the knives and forks.

Sit up straight, sit square with hands on the lap and do not fidget. Do not put elbows on the table. If you are served a meal that is already on the plate, wait until everyone has been served before



picking up your cutlery, unless invited by your host to start. Make sure others have been offered anything they might want from the table, such as butter, water, salt or pepper. Help yourself last and never stretch across people.

Eat at a relaxed pace and pace yourself to match your fellow diners. Keep your mouth closed and try to avoid making noises of any kind while eating, either with implements against the plate or teeth, or with actual ingestion of the food, e.g. slurping soup.

Talking while there is food in your mouth should be avoided at all costs - even when you have a conversational gem up your sleeve. When you have finished, place your knife and fork - with the tines facing upwards - together on your plate.

If you are confronted with a plateful that is not to your taste, try to soldier on to avoid hurt feelings.

Always compliment the cook.

PJ McGuire has the following suggestions on good table manners;

If You are a Guest at a Business Dinner

- Take your cues from the host.
- Don't order messy food. That means staying away from ribs, crab claws, spaghetti, even burgers and sandwiches. If you want pasta, order penne, fusilli or another type that is easy to eat.
- If you need to use the bathroom,

simply excuse yourself. No need to tell people where you are going. It is best to get up after a course is served, otherwise the servers will hold the food until everyone is seated and you will interrupt the flow of the meal.

- If you leave the table, place your napkin on the seat of the chair, not the table.

- Try to eat at the same pace as everyone at the table. A too-fast or too-slow eater can interfere with the rhythm of the meal.

Common Table Etiquette Dilemmas

PJ McGuire also addresses common issues people face while dining. These are discussed below:

When to start eating. If it is a cold dish, wait until everyone has been served. If it is a hot dish, it is ok to start eating when the people nearest to you have been served. The latter also holds true at longer banquet style tables—if the person on either side of you has also been served, you can start eating.

What never to do. Never, ever blow your nose at the table.

A common faux pas. Taking your neighbor's bread plate. Remember, bread plates are on the left, glasses on the right.

What about electronics? Turn off that cell phone/iPhone/Blackberry. Leave them in your briefcase. Never put them on the table. If you are waiting for an emergency call, explain upfront and apologise in

advance to everyone at the table that you are expecting a call. When it comes, take the call away from the table, then turn your phone off when you return.

Can I check email? Not really, if you simply have to check, excuse yourself from the table and check it somewhere else in the restaurant. But only do this once—no getting up every 10 minutes.

When is it appropriate to start talking business? If it is a designated "working lunch" and everyone knows it, start immediately. But if it is simply a meal with business colleagues, the rule of thumb is to wait until after finishing the main course.

Are thank you notes necessary? Absolutely! In today's more informal climate, a handwritten note stands out and helps people remember you. You might want to send a quick email immediately after the event, then follow up with the handwritten note. This goes for both guest and host.

Conclusion

I am of the view that the inclusion of the dining requirement for soon-to-be lawyers is a good idea as it is a way of reminding everyone of the importance of proper table etiquette. I can hardly think of any client who will be thrilled to have a business lunch or dinner with a lawyer who talks with food in his mouth or cannot even use his cutlery properly.