

# KNIFE AND FORK WITH THAT, SIR?

**INFORMAL DINING HAS BECOME A COMPLEX AFFAIR, SAYS KEVIN BRADDOCK. IT'S TIME WE LEARNED SOME MANNERS**

A codified scheme of modern table manners and dining etiquette does not exist today. But new behaviours (some acceptable, others less so) are emerging fast, because in the past 30 years there has been a huge expansion in the variety of eating experiences available to the average hungry person.

Manners used to be defined according to the traditional eating experiences – restaurants, dinner parties, and the family meal – which are still adhered to in some areas of society. But today it is possible to eat in a far greater range of places, styles and social milieux – take-aways at home, fast food, Sunday lunch in gastro-pubs, finger food in bars, bench eating in places like Asian restaurants, BBQs, coffee shops such as Starbucks... This is how the broad mass of Britain eats today, yet we are unsure about the new rules.

The strengthening of individualism and social mobility up and down the class register have accelerated atomisation in society: more and more work longer hours often in a solitary, self-employed way; or are single or in unstable relationships; or are remote from the structures of a close family. This drift has bred an awkwardness in everyday contact with others. Aggressive consumerism has also encouraged an American type of self-centredness that expects its wishes to be serviced instantly; equally, there has been a loss of shame and a collapse of deference in public life that leads to a disregard for others. Behaviour unthinkable for a previous generation – eating while talking, walking or at the desk – are now commonplace.

For many, eating has become lonely, an eat-to-live experience that hinders rather than encourages communication – the second function of dining. Who, in the pressured British economy, can afford to take a leisurely continental-style two-hour lunch with colleagues, or has the energy to corral friends into the familial proxy of a dinner party? There

is no doubt that some of the fussier antiquated manners of formal dining – like eating a banana with cutlery, or insisting on a fish knife – have a diminishing role in this world where the trend is towards the informal. Yet strangely, there is a growing appetite for *more* formality across many contexts, such as BBQs, business lunches and in informal dining places such as gastro-pubs. This is because in our embrace of informality we have, in the British way, over-done it and become lost in confusion.

## **MANY ASSERT A GOD-GIVEN RIGHT TO EAT NACHOS IN THE CINEMA, AS IF IT WERE THEIR OWN HOME, WHILE EQUAL NUMBERS FIND THEIR ENJOYMENT OF THE FILM DESTROYED BY THE INCESSANT CRUNCHING**

To a large extent, the dining location dictates the tenor of the engagement. But two particular areas cause concern. *The Daily Telegraph's* manners expert Drusilla Beyfus identifies eating alone, in public or on the hoof as suffering from an excess of informality. "You have to be aware that it is to some extent a spectator sport, that people are looking at you," she notes. "Is your lunch smelly or messy? You could say that finger-licking is a fact of life on the Tube, but it is not polite. People aren't aware of the effect their eating has on other people and the spectacle can be off-putting."

But it is when eating together in casual environments that negotiating a lack of rules causes friction (manners, after all, exist to lubricate social interaction). Many assert a God-given right to eat nachos in the cinema, as if it were their own home, while equal numbers find their enjoyment of the film destroyed by the incessant crunching. It must be added that the packaging and availability of convenience food does not automatically make for convivial dining. Serving ready-meals to guests can be tantamount to insulting

them. And bench-style dining, where delineation between spaces is nebulous, can cause the opposite of the friendliness it aspires to create.

It should be added that there is no correct way to enjoy food in these new ways today, but all too often the experiences themselves preclude the sharing and communication for which dining has always served as a platform. Lady Amber Leighton, who runs a finishing school, says some of her pupils "Are not doing anything *wrong* when they come to learn. But they see a point in learning a different set of rules about eating which they weren't taught, through no fault of their own." She adds, "They don't realise there is a pleasure in the whole charming thing of eating together."

This, overwhelmingly, is what is being lost amid the confusion. It may no longer be important to eat with a fish knife, but it is probably more important than ever that eating is done with great consideration for others otherwise we face a dim future eating together but alone. As everyone knows, dancing just isn't much fun without the spark of human contact. **GFR**

*Turn the page for or a list of modern dining do's and don'ts.*



*An all too casual affair*

## Modern Dining's Dos and Don'ts

- \* The last slice of takeaway pizza goes to whoever is generous enough to offer it around, but quick enough to take it when others vacillate. Fortune favours not only the brave, but also the rude.
- \* Beer is acceptable with dinner now, but never in pints. Shorter, stronger Belgian beers are welcome – they suggest connoisseurship.
- \* Mobile phones placed on the dining table are intrusive.
- \* Lunch meetings often fail to work – the lunch distracts from the meeting, and the food is ruined by the business. Coffee with a snack is best.
- \* Hosts dictate the level of formality at dinner parties, and successful ones err toward the less formal.
- \* Ordering for your date, friend or partner is the height of arrogance.
- \* The minimum amount of drink to bring to a dinner party is one bottle of wine per head – the maximum is the same plus six beers and a bottle of champagne. Bringing too much is as rude as bringing none.
- \* The correct time to arrive at a restaurant is five minutes before the agreed time. For dinner parties, it is 11 minutes after.
- \* Chefs at BBQs must take the initiative, but permit others to have a grill if they would like.
- \* Not only is it acceptable to read papers at lunch in a gastro-pub, it is almost obligatory.
- \* Ready-meals can be served at picnics but never at dinner parties.