

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DINING BEHAVIORS IN WESTERN CULTURE

Heather Van Winckle
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Because of the way we have been told to behave in formal and informal settings, we conform to standards of meal order, set our tables with the forks on the left, and eat our dessert after our dinner, all without much conscious thought. Most of us can trace our eating habits back to sitting at a dining table and being instructed in constant meal-time lessons on the correct way to hold our utensils, cut our food, pass dishes, and excuse ourselves until we had mastered the behaviors and gained the approval of our parents.

All cultures have developed patterns and methods for eating that control ingestion and make one aware of the needs of others in their society. Historically we can link table manners initially to ritual-based practices mainly in the name of religion. Feasts and sacrifices honoured gods and celebrated successes such as a bountiful harvest where families and communities shared and ate together. The social implications are that they were able to gain connection to each other and develop a sense of responsibility for the survival of their own self as well as the continuation of their people.

From there, the next largely influential source in the development of modern dining etiquette was a monk named Desiderius Erasmus. He wrote about table manners and linked them to religious virtue. His text *de civitate morum puerilium*, from 1530 proliferated due to the printing press, and became a source of education in countries such as France. Students were to copy passages from the book, learning how to read and write Latin, and were subsequently instilled with foundations for proper dining behaviors.

Arguably, Louis the 14th left the biggest impression on the structure of our dining systems as we practice today. After the rise of the Bourgeois class, the nobility stayed in Versailles. They found themselves losing status to the Bourgeoisie, now able to attain a new level of wealth, thus money could no longer serve as a distinguishing element to separate class structures. With their social rank hanging in the balance, a new level of refined behavior was adopted to reassert and separate them from the new money. The king was constantly surveilling his subjects, fearing treason and wanting to maintain his position of power. Nobility relied on the king for validation of their class and power, and they strove for higher levels of civility than previously necessary to impress Louis the 14th to gain his trust and support. While elaborate, multi-course meals were common place in the king's court, showing restraint and not being a glutton illustrated one's civility and mastery of manners.

The Bourgeoisie, at this point, was now allowed some access to Versailles and felt the tenuousness of their newly gained social position. Wanting to attain the level of nobility, they became even stricter about manners as they had more to lose with the king. In order to impose such self-restraints and inhibitions, they had to believe there to be moral implications to their behavior and gentility was brought to the home.

The goal, when it comes to dining behavior, is for etiquette to come off as natural, as if one knows of no other way to perform. Today, this system of naturalizing behavior expands to almost every facet of our lives. As people from farms began coming into the cities for work, wearing clothing that allowed for blending in was the best way to not be fingered as an outsider. Our fear of being discovered that we are pretending to be something better than what we are keeps us buying the popular clothing and technologies, and causes us to isolate ourselves when we are out in public. Everyone is watching us and judging us is the belief, and offending others or not measuring up may be the two biggest worries governing our self-policing state. If we all believe in the structure and follow its pattern, then it has power and value in our society and to not value the structure connotes regressive behavior and defiance towards progress.

Today, it is that aspect of surveillance and the fear of being seen that keeps us struggling with a utensil instead of just grabbing the food with our hands. Our aspirations to aim for something we have yet to accomplish also means however, that when dining, making good impressions can facilitate new relationships that can be exploited for personal gain. The notion that we constrain our behaviors to “fit in” can also be viewed as mastering a system to attain some new level of status, wealth or competence.

Etiquette has never been universal, but as texts on the subject developed, trends began to popularize and standards have started to blend in with one another eventually leading to the popularity of writers such as Emily Post.

The aim of these writings is to make individuals feel that they can attain a higher level of sophistication and impress, or at least not disappoint outsiders invited into their home. Emily Post believed that one did not have to be born into high society, and that through charm and manners, one could mobilize themselves to join the class of gentlefolk. The focus is on not looking nouveau riche, what was called being a parvenu, and the way to accomplish this is by internalizing etiquette and developing the sense of non-chalance that the people born into that society appear to have.

That said, although anyone can eventually learn how to set a table, serve guests, and host a dinner party, when one examines the rules proposed in etiquette text books, many seem quite arbitrary and perhaps are more rooted in the author’s personal taste than any sort of practicality or common sense. Without knowing about the formalities of a meal, one can easily be labeled low class and can be separated out from the more gentlefolk. This system of exclusion is established with overly-complicated rules to define a knowing class who merely have defined parameters to maintain their own “well-bred” people and keep out those that they deem unworthy. The hope of attaining the level of being one of these elites keeps the parvenu and the modern-day middle class striving to fit in and follow the codes and structures established. From an early age we are taught how to behave in these formal situations so that when we have the opportunity to dine amongst those above us, we can try and weave our way in to their society and move up in the social hierarchy. By controlling our eating, mannerisms and habits, we place our hopes in the ideology of social mobility, an idea that is perhaps foundational to the American way of life.

Dessert is served last because it was somewhere, somehow decided that fruit was an agreeable taste to follow heavy, multi-course entrees. There’s nothing stopping us from ordering and structuring our meal differently to match our personal desires other than standard protocol. I charge that what we save and carry forward from tradition should have some sort of value for

our society, or else it is just arbitrary and without meaning and we forget about our ability to choose and make decisions for ourselves. I encourage an investigation into these day-to-day behaviors that we all take for granted. If these structures can be questioned and dismantled, eventually the stigma around ordering dessert for dinner at a restaurant, or eating leftover birthday cake for breakfast will be removed and we can all be a little happier.

The first utensil is said to be the cupped hand. Eventually spoons and knives were common for dining in Western Europe, and men would be expected to bring their knife with them to a meal. Women were served by the men who would cut and feed the women with the knife. The fork, however, took longer to be adopted, initially thought to cause afflictions. With the Victorian Era, an interest in things and innovation led to an extreme extension of the eating tool repertoire to handle the vast variety of foods and develop highly specific utensil designs that would cater to the particular traits of individual food items. Some silverware sets had a total of 146 distinct kinds of utensils. Herbert Hoover, during his time as secretary of commerce, actually recommended that a limit of 55 utensils be placed on a silverware pattern, finding more than that to be excessive and unnecessary.

Questioning why dessert cannot start a meal is often thought to be juvenile, as it is understood that it customarily follows the main course. Whether practiced regularly or not, table manners and meal order are implied systems that mass Western culture seems to have adopted and naturalized. We all know how we are suppose to conduct ourselves in formal dining situations and, when unsure, we often cede to the behaviors of those around us out of fear of offending others and embarrassing ourselves. Volumes have been written for centuries on how humans are to act and interact when food is involved and these rules work their way into our subconscious without much consideration. Etiquette is sometimes arbitrary and for those not in the know it can have an exclusionary effect that often serves to define class. *Work from the Outside In* is an investigation into the power structures that function to maintain order at the dinner table and a guide for presenting the proper service for all-dessert-course meals.