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Mien matters

LISA MIRZA GROTT'S GREW UP REALLY MINDING HER MANNERS AND HAS MADE A CAREER OUT OF HELPING OTHERS DO IT, TOO

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Despite what your mother may have told you, it's not bad manners to rest your elbows on the dinner table -- but do it only if there's no food in front of you.

So says San Francisco etiquette expert and teacher Lisa Mirza Grotts, whose own elbows met the tabletop at lunch here the other day -- once the waiter removed the remains of her chicken salad.

Mealtime, she says, is a most problematic social occasion. It may confound even the most well-mannered among us, particularly when we're confronted with what seems to be the entire contents of silverware drawer and china cabinet left at our place setting.

There's a moment of panic.

Which fork (spoon, knife) do I use, and when? Is that my bread plate, or his? Did I just drink from someone else's water glass? What do I do with my soup spoon?

Oh dear!

"The most popular class I teach is how to set a table," says Grotts, who grew up in Carmichael and lives in San Francisco, where for 13 years she's been an etiquette and protocol consultant. Before that, she was then-San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown's director of protocol.

She calls herself "the manners maven of the Bay Area."

"After setting the table," says Grotts, "far and away it's concerns about bread and soup etiquette."

Here are her tips for surviving those two foods with your good manners intact:

Never, ever butter an entire roll or bread slice. Break off a small piece and butter only it. The rule is one bite of bread, one bit of butter.

Always spoon soup away from you. "It's more graceful," she says. "When you're spooning toward yourself, it looks like you're shoveling it in."

And let's say you're at a dinner party or a fancy restaurant this holiday season, and the table is a clutter of glassware and china. How do you know which bread plate and crystal are yours?

This is a trick that Grotts, a certified etiquette consultant, shares with her clients, who pay up to \$500 to attend her classes:

Make a "d" with your right hand by touching the tips of your thumb and index finger, and extending the other fingers. Your "d"rinks are to your right. Repeat with your left hand, but make a "b." It's your "b"read plate on the left.

A note: Please execute this exercise under the table, out of sight of your fellow diners.

Manners change with the times but never go out of style, says Grotts.

The National League of Junior Cotillions, based in Charlotte, N.C., each year honors celebrities who exhibit good manners. At the top of the 2009 list, released last week, was 20-year-old country singer Taylor Swift, for "consistently showing courtesy to her fans."

Grotts likes to say that "money doesn't buy taste, and it doesn't buy manners," but it's exactly what she sells. Her classes run \$100 for youths and \$250 to \$500 for adults. Individual consultations are \$200 an hour.

She also sells a downloadable etiquette guide on her Web site (www.amlgroup.com) for \$19.99 and recently published the book "A Passenger's Passport to Etiquette" (Xlibris, \$32, 56 pages), in which she gives "survival" tips for airplane travel.

Etiquette, she says, is simply a set of rules for social behavior.

"A lot of it -- manners, etiquette -- is common sense. I got my informal training with my mother, who always reminded me, even when I was in my 30s, to write thank-you notes."

After Grotts left the mayor's office, she attended a protocol school in Washington, D.C., for her formal training.

"I try to apply the Golden Rule to everything I do," she says while in Sacramento for the day. "My parents instilled that in me. But when my mother told me to mind my manners, I don't think she meant that for me and everybody else."

It's rude, she says, to point out to others their social gaffes. That would be bad manners.

Grotts grew up on Jacob Lane in Carmichael, near Jesuit High School. Her architect father, Julius Mirza, moved back to Turlock, where Grotts was born, after his wife, Jeannette, died.

"Lisa was from a very nice, outgoing, friendly family that was always entertaining," says Sacramento businesswoman Katina Rapton, Grotts' close friend since seventh grade. "She was always socially adept, and it doesn't surprise me that this is what she does for a living.

"She has a way about her that she can be proper and still be fun, she can teach and not judge. All those things that make people successful, that's what Lisa is."

Both women know people who've lost out on jobs or promotions because of poor table manners. Grotts' husband, John, works in banking in San Francisco and came home one day with an etiquette horror story.

"My husband takes people out to lunch as a test run, to see if they can conduct themselves properly. One (job candidate) ordered linguine and clams. At a business lunch. And got the sauce all over himself."

He didn't get the job.

Grotts also recalls the case of a corporate CEO seated next to her at a banquet. The poor fellow was so confused by the array of silverware that he asked the waiter to take everything away, other than what he needed for the current course.

"Instead of him 'cheating' and looking to see what other people were doing, the waiter had to bring him the silverware that went with each course," says Grotts.

"Not knowing which fork to use when didn't stall his career, but it certainly does for a lot of people. Everyone wants to do the right thing. It's like studying for an exam: If you're prepared, you'll be fine and feeling confident."

(Cheat sheet: Work your way from the outside in.)

Last, here is the manners maven's tip for helping you glide through the soup course:

Cream soups generally are served in a bowl that rests on a plate. Lay your spoon on the plate when you're done. Broths, on the other hand, usually have no plate, so leave your spoon in the bowl -- and not on the tablecloth.

"What I do is not back in fashion. It's always been applicable," says Grotts. "George Washington, when he was 14 years old, wrote 110 ways to act in a polite society. So this is nothing new."

HOLIDAY ETIQUETTE GUIDE

* PARTIES

What to do if guests show up but didn't RSVP?

If it's a cocktail party, you're in the clear. If it's a sit-down dinner, it's time to shuffle place settings to accommodate the unannounced guest.

What if I'm a guest with food allergies?

A thoughtful host usually will ask about food restrictions. If, however, you suspect something will make you sick, speak with your host immediately.

What is a charger?

It's a large, decorative plate that is normally on the table for the first course and is removed before the entree arrives.

Should I bring a hostess gift?

It shows your appreciation for someone's hard work and generosity. While hostess gifts are not mandatory, showing up empty-handed is in poor taste.

* TOASTS

Raise your glass when a toast is offered even if you don't drink. Toasts should be no longer than three minutes. Remember the three B's: begin, be brief and be seated. It's a toast, not a roast.

* CHRISTMAS CARDS

Always personalize imprinted cards with a short note or, at the very least, your signature.

-- Lisa Mirza Grotts

Call The Bee's Dixie Reid, (916) 321-1134.

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Etiquette and protocol consultant Lisa Mirza Grotts chats at a table in a midtown Sacramento restaurant recently. Once the food arrives, no elbows on the table, please.

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