

Smart? Fine, but Do You Know What to Do With the Olive Pits?

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At the annual senior etiquette dinner at Salve Regina University in Newport, R.I., in February, one student, Jennifer Bladykas, was surprised to learn that reaching for the salt before tasting her entree tells people she is prone to rash decisions. She also learned where to put the spoon after stirring her coffee, and in what direction to pass bread.

"Dining out seemed so simple, but I realize now it says a lot about your character," said Ms. Bladykas, a Long Island native who will begin a job with a New York City marketing firm after graduation.

Courtney Richardson, a senior at Lehman College in the Bronx, now knows that if the host orders a salad but he wants steak, he's eating salad, too. And after attending a March session of Goofs, Goblets and Getting the Edge, a program at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., Brandon Lee, a junior, sees the wisdom of doing without leftovers. "I probably would have said yes to the doggie bag," Mr. Lee said. "But they told us never to do that. It's not the Last Supper; it's business."

It used to be that college seniors and graduate students prepared for the work world with just the usual round of workshops on résumé writing and interview skills. But as this generation prepares for life after college, they are also flocking to seminars on dining etiquette, an offering on the rise at colleges and universities nationwide, to learn the fine points of dealing with olive pits and missing dessert forks.

Philip Gardner, an economist at Michigan State University who studies college labor market trends as director of the Collegiate Employment Research Institute, said students were doing much more than they used to in preparation for the work world. "The job market is still very competitive," he said, "and there is a lot of experienced labor out there also looking for work."

At Marist College, the waiting list for the twice-a-semester dining etiquette program is hundreds of students long; the Dining for Success program at the State University of New York in Binghamton was so popular last fall that it had to be moved to a bigger hall.

Etiquette consultants say business is booming. "I started doing Girl Scout troops and PTA trainings in the late 1990's, but my business has increased 100 percent since 2000," said Maureen Wild Sanders, founder of High Road Solutions, a business protocol training firm in Bridgewater, N.J. "Now 75 percent of my clients are in higher education or corporations."

Although good manners have always been important in business, etiquette specialists say its importance lapsed in the heady days of the late 90's.

"You had these young entrepreneurs wearing sandals and a T-shirt to work, and that spilled over into blue-chip corporations, who questioned their buttoned-up culture," said Pamela J. Holland, co-author of "Help! Was That a Career Limiting Move?" (Career Skills Press, 2001) and chief operating officer of Brody Communications in Philadelphia, which provides dining etiquette training to corporate clients. "I think this renewed interest in civility and manners is a reaction to that."

The lack of formal dining knowledge seems especially acute in Generation Y - generally considered anyone born after 1980. James Chung, president of Research Advisors in Boston, a strategy and research firm that focuses on generational demographics and shifts in social attitudes, says this generation has grown up during a fundamental shift in American family structure and a move away from formality in culture generally.

"This was a very mobile generation of kids - they spawned ubiquitous eat-on-the-run products and supersize drinks that fit into minivan cup holders - and they lost the habit of valuing and respecting family dining time," Mr. Chung said.

Of course, a business meal is not a family dinner, and keeping elbows off the table will not be enough to impress a potential employer. Students at college etiquette seminars are usually asked to completely rethink the way they view a meal.

Ann Marie Sabath, founder of At Ease, a Midtown Manhattan etiquette training firm, and author of "Business Etiquette: 101 Ways to Conduct Business With Charm & Savvy" (Career Press, 2002), conducted the dining etiquette program at Lehman College in April. She tried to impress on students that business meals "aren't really about eating."

"These kids don't realize that dinner or lunch is an interview; the food is just an excuse for getting together. We teach them everything from what to order to how to eat - no cutting up all the food beforehand, no chewing on the ice when the drink is done."

At Marist College, etiquette training includes a multicourse dinner of challenging foods, like salads with cherry tomatoes and olives with pits, French onion soup and pasta with red sauce.

SUNY Binghamton began its dining etiquette program in 2003 in response to feedback from employers and alumni that its students were "smart but needed to strengthen their savvy and social skills," said Nancy Paul, director of the school's career development center..

Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., holds a four-course dining etiquette workshop each spring, and Richard L. White, director of career services, said he was surprised at the general level of naïveté.

"Students ask things like what to do with food stuck in your teeth, what to do if you spill something, drop your fork, don't like your food," he said. "They are also very concerned about making conversation during meals. This generation lives on the Internet and simply doesn't know how to make social chit-chat."

Although it is Generation Y entering the work force, their predecessors in Generation X - now aged 26 to 40 - are often in middle and even senior management, and companies increasingly call on consultants like Ms. Sabath to help them brush up on etiquette skills. Ms. Sabath said 60 percent of her clients were corporations wanting to make sure employees did not embarrass themselves or the company when conducting business socially.

Pauline Winick and Dale Webb, founders of the Protocol Center in Miami, said corporations were about the same percentage of their clients. "We are often asked to train midlevel employees," Ms. Winick said, "because the company can't send them to work with a client until they know their level of social skill."

Regardless of one's place in the work hierarchy, it is hard to argue against good manners, said Ms. Wild Sanders. "If you are competing for a job or promotion against others with the same level of competency but you have the social skills, too," she said, "you always clobber the competition."

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