

Why Manners?

Written by L.A. Plume

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The above question was posed to Mr. X, who responded: "Oh, you mean the lady goes first through a door, because they do; gentleman stand when a lady is standing at the table."



The lady orders first; when the man orders he can judge his courses so they both eat at the same time. The knife and fork are put together, face down, in the center of the plate when you finish a meal so the waiter knows to clear. These are all signals to make communication easier, like steps in a dance; of course if one or the other doesn't take the trouble to learn the signals they'll probably tread on someone's toes. Once learned, good manners both impress and make things go more easily. The lady should always acknowledge the politeness with a brief thank you."

Acknowledging politeness can be a bit of tricky business if you are not attuned to the nuances. I'll never forget (although I'm hoping he has) the time I was meeting Mr. X for lunch. I parked my car on Bay Street, gathered my handbag, car keys and quarters for the parking meter and was about to get out of my car. Suddenly my door was opened for me and there was Mr. X with his hand extended. Not being accustomed to such courtesy, I unwittingly reacted by putting my quarters in the hand that was offered to help me out of the car. I'm not sure which was greater, his confusion or my embarrassment!

Of course we women can open and close doors all by ourselves. But there is something nice about the fact that some people still want to do it for us. Accepting those gestures allows a measure of chivalry that is not often acknowledged these days.

Bonnie recently had an interesting experience with such manners. Her beau came to visit rather late one evening and she asked him if he had closed the gate in her driveway. He said he hadn't so she asked him to please do so. He didn't want to go back outside because it was late, so she said she would go do it herself. Of course, he then said he would close the gate – which he did, and closed it behind him and went back home. I guess she didn't specify on which side of the gate she wanted him to do the closing.

Another sticky wicket is how to order in a restaurant. If you are someone's guest, how many courses do you order so the food is served at the same time? Mr. X's friend wanted soup at dinner but his wife didn't order soup. He was then faced with the dilemma of ordering it for himself and thereby eating while she was not. He didn't order the soup for himself even though he had wanted it. Being served a course alone while someone just sits and watches you eat is awkward. A long time ago, when I was in college, the parents of my date took us to dinner; afterwards they asked if I wanted dessert. There was individual Baked Alaska on the menu – my then favorite dessert, so I ordered one. No one else chose anything and there I was with this flaming concoction in front of me and a set of parents who thought I was rude to have ordered it. (It turned out to be a test I didn't pass, but that's another story.)

The rule of thumb is for the host(ess) to suggest what he thinks is appropriate, which may well be determined by budget. He can ask if his guests would like salad first, or say something

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like “the shrimp cocktail is especially good here.” The host can also lead the way by first stating what he is going to have. And by the way, guests should never order wine for the table unless they are asked to do so, or they plan on paying for it themselves. Remember that your waiter/waitress is probably only earning the tips that you leave. Acknowledge them, look at them when they speak to you or serve your food, tip them appropriately and thank them for their service.

Now, if there were only guidelines on the etiquette of easily dividing the check among a group of women dining out together!