



A detail from *Grace at Table* by Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin (1740)
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Table Manners Matter

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« Les animaux se repaissent ; l'homme mange ; l'homme d'esprit seul sait manger. » (Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin).

(Animals feed ; man eats ; only the gentleman knows how to eat properly.)

In this aphorism, the author of “*Physiologie du Goût*” marks the difference, the abyss that separates animals from mere humans, and these from educated, literate, elite ones. In “*knowing to eat*”, Brillat-Savarin also implies appreciation, analysis of sensorial perceptions, discovery of known and novel flavors, and the obligation to mention, share, even discuss the personal and social, multi-faceted pleasures of eating. He also affirms the necessary familial or social rituals and rules that are part of a meal; eating alone is just *human*; it is not for the *spirited*. Hence table manners are an intrinsic, important part of the *know* of a food, a dish, a meal or a feast.

Table manners are important for everyone. It shows respect for the others sitting there. It is important that children learn these, and adults need to lead by example. The communal meal –a communion- is an eating occasion that takes place at a certain time and includes prepared food. Since humans mastered fire, they assembled to cook, or roast, and rapidly established rituals. Food was hard won and precious; it was sacred, respected, appreciated, enjoyed. How to cut it, and cook it properly required skills. Spilled food attracted insects or beasts. Clothes had to be kept clean, and rules of behavior were rapidly imposed. Table manners are the rules used while eating, which may also include the use of utensils. Different cultures observe different rules for table manners. Each family or group sets its own standards for how strictly these rules are to be enforced. These rules help for integration into the group, harmonization of behavior, and discipline.

Interestingly, different cultures have different thoughts on table manners – elbows on the table, for example, is very British. Some countries think burping after a meal is a sign that it was lush. While it is important to have good manners, it is actually more important to keep up the tradition of eating at the table as a family, with conversations and no mobile phones.

Manners matter immensely because they are part of our social skills. How well we interact with others is key to our future success. Good manners will open doors that the best education cannot. Few will want an ill-mannered person in their workplace, home or social sphere, and this is as relevant today as it was hundreds of years ago.

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Manners begin in the home as children learn from what they see and experience. If their parents use good table manners, their children will, too. Where table manners, and manners generally, are non-existent, children will have no example to learn from.

The following paragraphs have been copied from Wikipedia. They apply to *formal* events –e.g. an invitation to Buckingham Palace- since many of these *diktats* are ignored in daily, family settings.

Traditionally in **Western Europe**, the host or hostess takes the first bite unless he or she instructs otherwise. The host begins after all food for that course has been served and everyone is seated. In a group dining situation, it is considered impolite to begin eating before all the group have been served their food and are ready to start.

Napkins should be placed on the lap and not tucked into clothing. They should not be used for anything other than wiping your mouth and should be placed unfolded on the seat of your chair should you need to leave the table during the meal or placed unfolded on the table when the meal is finished.

The fork is held with the left hand and the knife held with the right. The fork is held generally with the tines down, using the knife to cut food or help guide food on to the fork. When no knife is being used, the fork can be held with the tines up. With the tines up, the fork balances on the side of the index finger, held in place with the thumb and index finger. Under no circumstances should the fork be held like a shovel, with all fingers wrapped around the base. A single mouthful of food should be lifted on the fork and you should not chew or bite food from the fork. The knife should be held with the base into the palm of the hand, not like a pen with the base resting between the thumb and forefinger. The knife must never enter the mouth or be licked. When eating **soup**, the spoon is held in the right hand and the bowl tipped away from the diner, scooping the soup in outward movements. The soup spoon should never be put into the mouth, and soup should be sipped from the side of the spoon, not the end. Food should always be chewed with the mouth closed. Talking with food in one's mouth is seen as very rude. Licking one's fingers and eating slowly can also be considered impolite.

Food should always be tasted before **salt** and **pepper** are added. Applying condiments or seasoning before the food is tasted is viewed as an insult to the

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cook, as it shows a lack of faith in the cook's ability to prepare a meal.

Butter should be cut, not scraped, from the butter dish using a butter knife or side plate knife and put onto a side plate, not spread directly on to the bread. This prevents the butter in the dish from gathering bread crumbs as it is passed around. Bread rolls should be torn with the hands into mouth-sized pieces and buttered individually, from the butter placed on the side plate, using a knife. Bread should not be used to dip into soup or sauces. As with butter, cheese should be cut and placed on your plate before eating.

Only white wine or rosé is held by the stem of the glass; red by the bowl. Pouring one's own drink when eating with other people is acceptable, but it is more polite to offer to pour drinks to the people sitting on either side. Wine bottles should not be upturned in an ice bucket when empty.

It is impolite to reach over someone to pick up food or other items. Diners should always ask for items to be passed along the table to them. In the same vein, diners should pass those items directly to the person who asked. It is also rude to slurp food, eat noisily or make noise with cutlery.

Elbows should remain off the table.

When one has finished eating, this should be communicated to other diners and waiting staff by placing the knife and fork together on the plate, at approximately 6 o'clock position, with the fork tines facing upwards.

At family meals, children are often expected to ask permission to leave the table at the end of the meal.

Should a mobile telephone (or any other modern device) ring or if a text message is received, the diner should ignore the call. In exceptional cases where the diner feels the call may be of an urgent nature, they should ask to be excused, leave the room and take the call (or read the text message) out of earshot of the other diners. Placing a phone, keys, handbag or wallet on the dinner table is considered rude.

My father used to take a sandwich and a yogurt for lunch at his desk; he worked long hours, and skipped the family dinner -often in the kitchen- prepared and served by my mother; we (the children) were always hungry and swallowed the food as soon as it reached the plate. The above-mentioned *étiquette* was blatantly ignored.

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Courtesy Yum of China

In **East Asia** –e.g. China or Korea- chances are that the foreign guest will be invited to a banquet, or to a restaurant, with numerous participants. The following recommendations usually apply:

Seating and serving customs play important roles in **Chinese** dining etiquette. For example, the diners should not sit down or begin to eat before the host (or guest of honor) has done so. When everyone is seated, the host offers to pour tea, beginning with the cup of the eldest person. The youngest person is served last as a gesture of respect for the elders.

Just as in Western cultures, communal utensils (chopsticks and spoons) are used to bring food from communal dishes to an individual's own bowl (or plate). It is considered rude and unhygienic for a diner to use his or her own chopsticks to pick up food from communal bowls and plates when such utensils are present. Other potentially rude behaviors with chopsticks include playing with them, separating them in any way (such as holding one in each hand), piercing food with them, or standing them vertically in a plate of food. (The latter is especially rude, evoking images of incense or 'joss' sticks used

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ceremoniously at funerals). A rice bowl may be lifted with one hand to scoop rice into the mouth with chopsticks. It is also considered rude to look for a piece one would prefer on the plate instead of picking up the piece that is closest to the diner as symbol of fairness and sharing to the others.

The last piece of food on a communal dish is never served to oneself without asking for permission. When offered the last bit of food, it is considered rude to refuse the offer. It is considered virtuous for diners to not leave any bit of food on their plates or bowls. Condiments, such as soy sauce or duck sauce, may not be routinely provided at high-quality restaurants. The assumption is that perfectly prepared food needs no condiments and the quality of the food can be best appreciated.

In **Korean** formal settings, a meal is commenced when the eldest or most senior diner at the table partakes of any of the foods on the table. Before partaking, intention to enjoy their meal should be expressed. Similarly, satisfaction or enjoyment of that meal should be expressed at its completion. On occasion, there are some dishes which require additional cooking or serving at the table. In this case, the youngest or lowest-ranked adult diner should perform this task. When serving, diners are served food and drink in descending order starting with the eldest or highest-ranked diner to the youngest or lowest-ranked.

Rice is always consumed with a spoon and never with chopsticks in formal settings. Picking up one's plate or bowl and bringing it to the mouth is considered rude.

Usually, diners will have a bowl of soup on the right with a bowl of rice to its left. Alternatively, soup may be served in a single large communal pot to be consumed directly or ladled into individual bowls. Dining utensils will include a pair of chopsticks and a spoon. Common chopstick etiquette should be followed, but rice is generally eaten with the spoon instead of chopsticks. Often some form of protein (meat, poultry, fish) will be served as a main course and placed at the center of the table within reach of the diners. *Banchan* will also be distributed throughout the table. If eaten with spoon, *banchan* is placed on the spoonful of rice before entering the mouth. With chopsticks, however, it is fed to the mouth directly. The last piece of food on a communal dish should not be served to oneself without first asking for permission, but, if offered the last

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bit of food in the communal dish, it is considered rude to refuse the offer. Bowls of rice or soup should not be picked up off the table while dining, an exception being made for large bowls of *Korean noodle soup*. Slurping while eating noodles and soup is generally acceptable. It is not uncommon to chew with the mouth open.

If alcohol is served with the meal, it is common practice that when alcohol is first served for the eldest/highest-ranked diner to make a toast and for diners to clink their glasses together before drinking. The clinking of glasses together is often done throughout the meal. A host should never serve alcohol to themselves. Likewise, it is considered rude to drink alone. Instead, keep pace with other diners and both serve and be served the alcohol. Alcohol should always be served to older and higher-ranked diners with both hands, and younger or lower-ranked diners may turn their face away from other diners when drinking the alcohol.

For children, who want to eat with their hands, there are many countries, cuisines, that require manual feeding:

Ethiopian cuisine (Amharic: የኢትዮጵያ ምግብ) characteristically consists of vegetable and often very spicy meat dishes. This is usually in the form of *wat*, a thick stew, served atop *injera*, a large sourdough flatbread, which is about 50 centimeters (20 inches) in diameter and made out of fermented *teff* flour. Ethiopians eat most of the time with their right hands, using pieces of *injera* to pick up bites of entrées and side dishes.

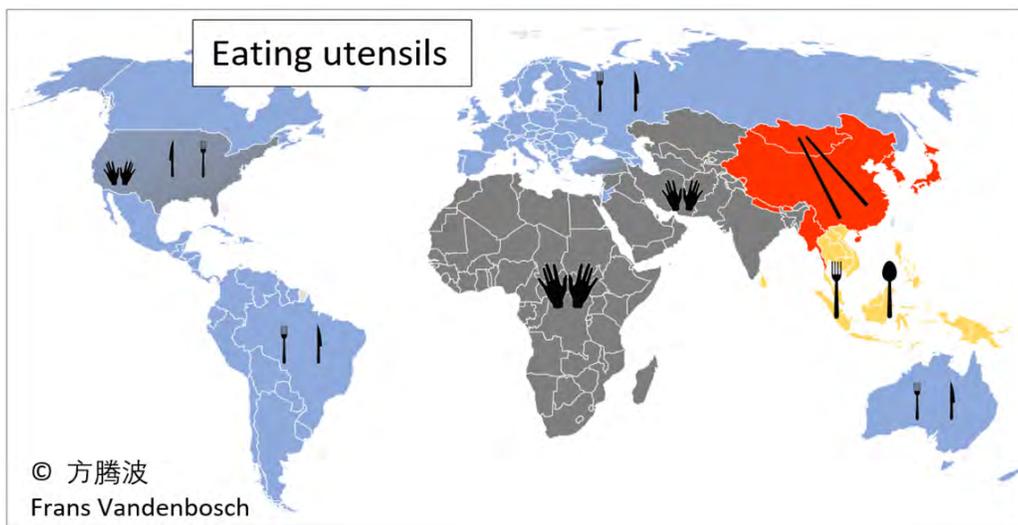
The traditional way of eating **Filipino** (*pinoy*) cuisine is with the hands, especially dry dishes such as *inihaw* or *prito*. The diner will take a bite of the main dish, then eat rice pressed together with his fingers. Filipinos tend to feel the spirit of *kamayan* when eating amidst nature during out-of-town trips, beach vacations, and town fiestas.

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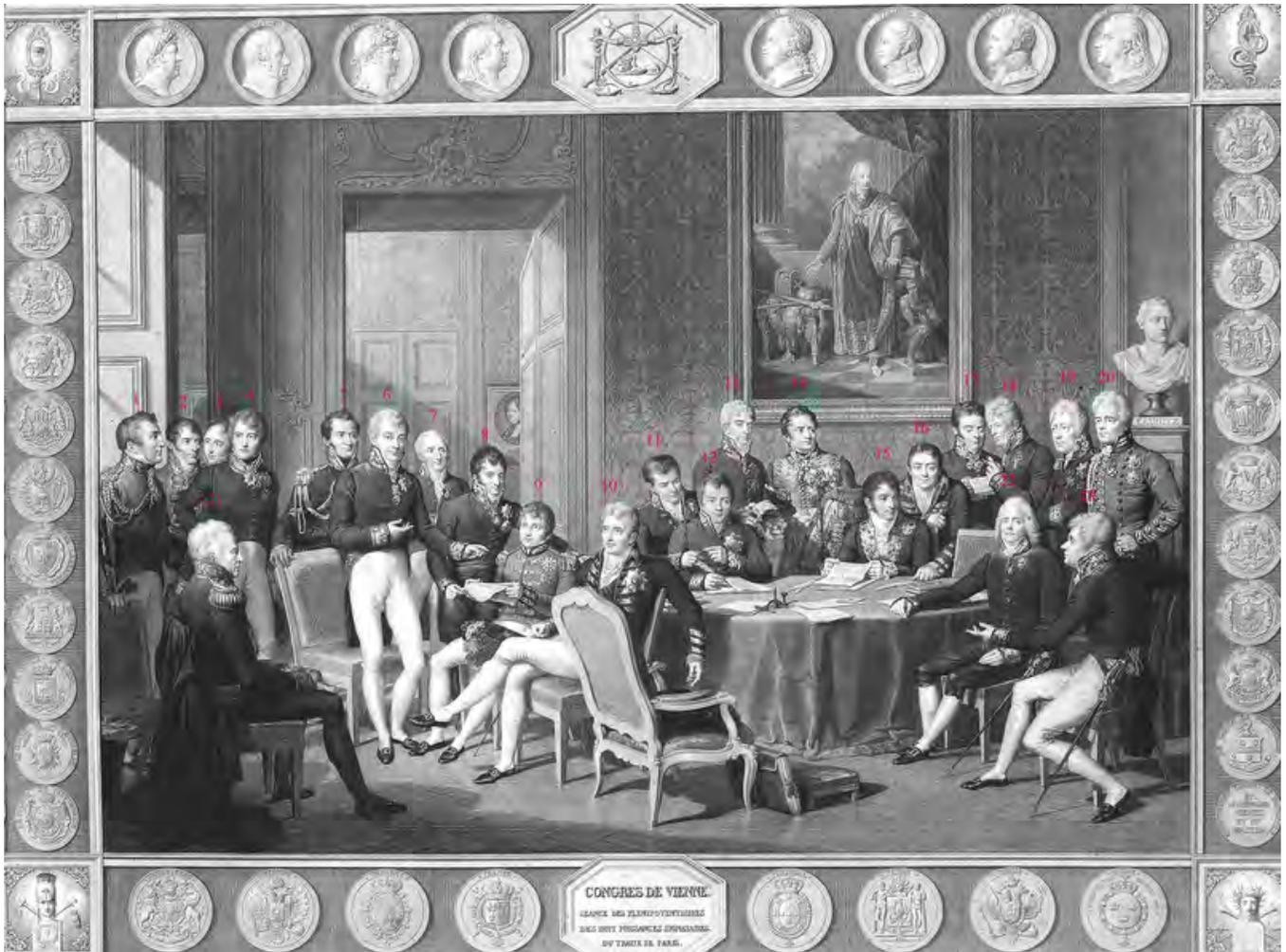
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But there are **many** countries where inhabitants eat with their hands frequently:



... SURPRISE! The United States has a significant population of these!

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Copyright: Wikipedia

And remember the admonestation of Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord to Klemens von Metternich at the final banquet of the Congress of Vienna on June 9th, 1815 (a few days before the Battle of Waterloo). Talleyrand was proud and happy to have a great vintage of Chambertin (the most famous wine of Burgundy) poured at the banquet and he toasted Metternich (who faced him at the head-table). Metternich toasted back and gulped down his glass content.

Then Talleyrand exclaimed: ***Ah NON, Monsieur!** Such a wine deserves much more! First you look at it by rolling slowly your glass in the light, and discover all the colors that it reveals. Then you smell, you sniff it, dissect the diverse aromas and perfumes, find memories and reminiscences of happy moments of your life, and then you sniff it*

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*again because the aromas take time to be fully released. Then, and then ONLY, you taste it, you chew it, to move it around your tongue and the walls of your mouth, and you swallow it in beatitude. And **THEN... YOU TALK ABOUT IT!***

Please do that whenever you enjoy a food, a dish, a meal!

References

- <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/family/parenting/table-manners-thing-past-blame/>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Table_manners