Elegance ACADEMY

A COMPLIMENTARY GUIDE



10 Common Dining Mistakes

And the elegant ways to avoid them

A practical guide to feeling confident, polished, and comfortable at any table.

Irina Khai

Etiquette & Elegance Coach | New York

A little knowledge makes a beautiful difference.



Have you ever found yourself at a beautifully set table, wondering which fork to use, where to place your napkin, or whether it’s time to begin eating?

You’re certainly not alone.

Dining etiquette is something many of us were never formally taught. Yet knowing a few simple conventions can make a remarkable difference in how comfortable we feel, whether we’re attending a formal dinner, meeting someone for the first time, or celebrating with family and friends.

I’ve put together ten common dining mistakes and the simple ways to avoid them. My hope is that you’ll spend less time wondering what to do and more time enjoying the company of the people around you.

Warmly, Irina

Buttering the entire bread roll



Break off a bite-sized piece before buttering it.

At a formal dinner, bread is enjoyed one bite-sized piece at a time.

Place your bread on the small plate to your left. Break off a piece with your fingers, butter just that piece, and enjoy it before preparing the next.

It’s a small habit that makes eating bread much neater and more graceful.

Forgetting about your posture



Sit comfortably upright with relaxed shoulders.

The way you sit at the table is as much a part of your presence as the way you speak.

Lower yourself gently into your chair, sit comfortably upright, and relax your shoulders. Keep your elbows off the table while eating, with your wrists resting lightly near the edge when appropriate.

Good posture should look natural, never rigid or uncomfortable.

Misplacing your napkin



Set the napkin across your lap.

Your napkin belongs on your lap throughout the meal.

If you need to excuse yourself temporarily, one traditional convention is to leave it loosely folded on your chair.

At the end of the meal, place it neatly to the left of your plate, without refolding it into its original shape.

And remember, your dinner napkin is for gently blotting your lips, not for wiping your nose or cleaning your hands.

Sending the wrong message with your cutlery



Finished position, with both handles at about five o’clock.

Did you know that the way you position your knife and fork can help communicate with your server?

In Continental dining style, when taking a pause, rest your knife and fork on your plate in an inverted V position.

When you’ve finished, place them parallel to one another, with the handles pointing toward approximately four or five o’clock and the knife blade facing inward.

Once you’ve used your utensils, they should not return to the tablecloth.

Holding your wine glass by the bowl



Grip the stem below the bowl.

There’s a practical reason why wine glasses have stems.

Holding the glass by its stem helps preserve the temperature of the wine and keeps fingerprints away from the bowl.

It’s a simple adjustment that is both practical and refined.

Misunderstanding the purpose of wine tasting



Smell the wine briefly before taking a small sip.

When the server pours a small amount of wine for you to taste, the purpose is not to decide whether you like the wine you've ordered.

You're checking that the wine is in good condition.

A gentle swirl, a brief appreciation of its aroma, and a small sip are usually all you need.

If everything is as it should be, a simple "Thank you, that's lovely" is enough. There's no need to turn the moment into a performance.

Passing only the salt



Set both shakers within your neighbor’s reach.

When someone asks you to pass the salt, traditionally, the pepper should accompany it.

Passing them together makes it easier for everyone at the table to locate both seasonings.

Place them within the person’s reach rather than directly into their hands. A thoughtful little detail that is easy to remember.

Keeping your phone on the table



Silence your phone and tuck it away before the meal.

Even a phone that isn’t being used can suggest that your attention might be elsewhere.

Silence your phone and keep it in your handbag or pocket during the meal.

If you’re expecting an important call, let your companions know in advance and discreetly excuse yourself when the call comes.

Giving someone your undivided attention is one of the simplest ways to show respect.

Beginning before others are served



Keep your cutlery down while others are being served.

Your meal has arrived, but the person next to you is still waiting.

As a general courtesy, wait until everyone has been served before beginning.

At a private dinner, take your cue from your host. If your host or dining companions encourage you to begin while your food is warm, accept their invitation graciously.

Dining together is a shared experience, and being aware of others is part of what makes it enjoyable.

Reaching across the table



Ask for the butter and let your neighbor pass it.

Even when something appears to be just within reach, stretching across another person’s place setting can intrude on their personal space.

Instead, simply ask: “Would you mind passing the butter, please?”

A polite request is always more gracious than reaching across someone’s plate.

Your Dining Etiquette Essentials

- [ ] Break and butter bread one bite at a time.
- [ ] Maintain a relaxed, upright posture.
- [ ] Use your napkin discreetly and appropriately.
- [ ] Position your cutlery to indicate when you've finished.
- [ ] Hold your stemmed wine glass by the stem.
- [ ] Taste wine to check its condition.
- [ ] Pass the salt and pepper together.
- [ ] Keep your phone away from the table.
- [ ] Be mindful of when others begin eating.
- [ ] Ask politely rather than reaching.

Remember, you don't need to master everything at once. Practice these small habits until they become second nature.

Hello, I'm Irina Khai.



I'm an etiquette and elegance educator based in New York and the founder of Elegance Academy.

Through my workshops and private coaching, I help people develop the social skills, confidence, and graceful habits that allow them to feel comfortable in both everyday life and special occasions.

I believe that etiquette should be practical, relevant, and enjoyable. It's not about perfection or trying to impress others. It's about feeling confident in yourself while being considerate of the people around you.

200+ Students

Through my in-person etiquette classes and workshops in New York.

Hospitality Educator

Providing professional etiquette and guest experience training for restaurant teams.

Professional Education

Graduate of the Austrian Higher School of Etiquette.



Published Author

Author of the children's book Tales of Kindness and Good Manners.



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Eternal Elegance Journey

Would you like to go beyond the dining table?

An online learning experience for women who wish to cultivate elegance, social confidence, and grace in their everyday lives.

Through 20 recorded workshops, we will explore dining etiquette, communication, hosting, personal presence, and the many other dimensions of everyday elegance.

If this sounds like something you've been looking for, I'd love to hear from you.

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Irina Khai | Etiquette & Good Manners for Modern Life

www.eleganceandmanners.com
eleganceacademyny@gmail.com