

Dinner Pieces

being seven related writings for a better faith and life

By and Based on the Books of Robert J. Cormier (www.thefaithkit.org)

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How to Go Out to Dinner

First step: Pick the place. This is best done by a process of elimination.

Stay away from chains. Chains are businesses whose intention is the opposite of yours. You want to spend a night out. They want you in and out.

For the same reason, stay away from places that advertise.

Stay away from big places—especially those that also do catering. Not only are they businesses, they are loud. And with many people competing to be heard, they get louder and louder and louder.

Stay away from places on highways. They don't need to care.

The opposite is true of neighborhood places. Or places far from the beaten track.

As you enter be prepared for them to offer you a choice of tables. A good table has a view, is in a corner, is not too close to other tables. A bad table is near the kitchen, the bathroom, or the door, or in the middle of the room.

A gentleman gives the lady the best seat. The best seat is the seat with the best view. If you get a corner table you can create privacy by facing the walls.

With two person tables it is obvious how to sit. Two people at a four person table sit cater-corner because this way it is easier to be heard without raising your voice. It should be a matter of common sense that it is not romantic to sit side by side. At tables that are meant for two people on two sides, ladies sit next to the wall.

Note the implication that, generally, a good dinner party is limited to four.

By the time you sit down, electronic devices should be off, and so should everyone's hat and coat. (Those who need this point explained to them probably ought not to go out to dinner.)

However artistic its fold, a napkin is just that. Pick it up and put in your lap. Clear it periodically.

If there is a candle, be sure it gets lit. Not only do candles help people to look their best, but their light creates a special space that is all yours.

Keep in mind: Your bread dish is on the left; your glasses are on the right. (Use the silverware from the outside in.)

Ask that everyone's water glass be filled as soon as it becomes clear that this is not going to happen unless you do.

When in doubt, and always in groups, get *white* wine. (The red in red wine—tannin—makes some people sick.) Red wine is served at room temperature; white wine is served chilled. Never put ice in either.

We taste wine to see if it has gone bad. We do not return it because it wasn't what I expected. We do not smell corks; we check corks—for the stain that shows that the wine was shipped correctly, and for the many lines which show a good cork.

If the glass has a stem, use it. The stem helps the heat of your hand not to heat the wine. (By the opposite principle, a snifter is made to make you heat the glass.)

See *In Vino Veritas* below.

Except for water, no one drinks until there's been a toast. (Clinking should be optional.)

Don't look at the menu until they have come at least once and you have had the chance to tell them "we haven't even looked." (This is the nicest way to show that you've come for the evening, not to get food.)

Closing a menu lets them know that you are ready. (Not closing it is a way to slow them down.)

Never call a waiter loudly; and absolutely never by snapping your fingers. Never raise your hand above your head.

Beware of bread. Especially if you're planning to use even more to sop up some kind of sauce. And it is *not* crass to sop up sauce. Sauce is meant to be sopped up.

If there is oil and vinegar on the table, you are allowed to pour some in a dish as an alternative to butter for your bread.

Salt and pepper are always passed together.

Courses make a meal an evening. Prize a restaurant that allows you to order one course at a time.

Appetizers can be shared; and four people can share two, etc. (Of course, oriental dishes are meant to be shared.)

You can get your appetizer from the vegetable list.

Soups are appetizers. Do not get soup if you are planning a pasta as your main dish; the two do not work together well in most stomachs.

Soups rarely go in summer. Hot liquid makes you hot.

At oriental restaurants, soup is a first course, before appetizers. This is also true of most Iberian restaurants, at which it comes as a little gift.

At many Italian restaurants, a half-pasta is often an option for an appetizer, and a whole pasta is an option before a main dish. (Many Italian restaurants also offer anti-pasto, typically a plate of hot or cold finger foods, as a separate course before pasta or soup.)

Only in America does salad come next. Americans use salad to clean the taste buds. Europeans use salad as a filler. You are allowed to decide when you want the salad brought. You are also allowed to have the dressing "on the side," i.e., not on the salad so that the salad will not get soggy.

With regard to any dish you order, you can always ask for certain ingredients *not* to be included. You can sometimes get something added.

Don't use the extreme words; never say "rare" or "well done." If you want it cooked say "medium"; if you want it pink say "medium-rare."

You can return something that was prepared so poorly that you cannot enjoy it—but you do not go out to dinner looking for trouble.

You wait for others to be served unless your food is getting cold or soggy.

Except for soup, it is not wrong to finish the food from someone else's plate.

It can be nice to pass plates to someone who is taking them away; but we never stack them as though we were at home and/or we want 'em outta' here.

And neither are we NOR THEY supposed to move plates, or talk about coffee or dessert, until everyone at the table has finished the previous course. (Traditionally, Greek restaurants take nothing from the table until the entire meal is over.)

Take as long as you like before dessert, especially if there is still wine on the table.

Desserts feature sugar in order to slow down digestion and help you feel you've had enough. (Appetizers feature salt for the opposite reason.) Of course, desserts can be shared. Fruit and certain cheeses can be a dessert or a separate course prior to dessert.

Generally American coffee is served before dessert. European coffee is, ideally, another course after dessert. American coffee (regular or decaf) entitles you to refills. European does not.

You should not be given the check until you ask for it.

To call it a "tip" is a misnomer. A tip is something you choose to give your barber. In an American restaurant, a tip is direct payment for service.

15% is the standard for good service. You do not tip more in a fancy restaurant; a higher tip is built into the cost of the food. You do not pay tip on tax. You do pay tip on the sub-total *before* discounts or promotions. You should be more generous at a place that allowed you to bring your own wine.

If you are taking someone out, it is better to charge it. In no case do you count money in front of people or refer to the bill or let the other person see it.

If you are going to divide the bill, divide it. Have no friend who pays only for what he says he had. (He never figures in tax or tip.) If someone in the group had much less than everyone else, the group pays for him. After all, he only came out to keep you company.

Finally, on leaving, you do not refold your napkin. See “The Napkin” below.

Concluding thoughts:

“How to Go Out to Dinner” was not meant as a commercial for the food industry, much less the idea that you need to spend money to have fun. Indeed, the meal described above can be had at many “moderate” but real restaurants. In general, expensive places are only expensive in order to keep certain people out. This need not bother anyone. After all, if there are people willing to pay through the nose so not to eat with me, why would I want to eat with them?

Either way, the other patrons, the ambiance, the view, the service and the food make up only about 5% of an evening. The rest is conversation. The above just provides the setting, if not the excuse, for conversation.

But if you don’t want to fail to live in the present, or to make a mockery of what you’re doing now, you should not talk about one meal (or trip) while you are having (or taking) another.

How *Not* to Go Out To Dinner

Many of the rules for dining are the opposite of the rules for living, and for living faith. For example:

Go only to one-of-a-kind restaurants. But not Churches.

Sit cater-corner; don't face each other. But do face life, and what's really going on, including in you.

Put your napkin in your lap. But in life we don't hide what we use to clean up from our mistakes.

Don't be ready to order the first time they ask. But do be ready for what life might bring you.

Pick and choose from the menu. But not from among doctrines.

White wine in restaurants. Red wine in church.

Beware of too much bread. But not the bread of life.

Get dessert—you do want to hang onto the meal. But not to life here.

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Re “tipping”: It's not a gratuity; it's what we owe, just like worship.

In Vino Veritas

There are a number of things to know about wine. Many call to mind things to know about God and the life of faith.

For one, moderation is important. Moderation allows most things we enjoy to be good. Most things we enjoy cease to be good when we take them to extremes. And the best way not to do that: Have a real faith that gives you real peace and you will not need or want to take things to extremes.

There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of wine—sweet and dry. Children and the uninitiated tend to prefer sweet, and as their taste matures,

they begin to prefer dry. This parallels progress in a person's spiritual life: They start out preferring talk which is sweet (love Jesus; Jesus loves you) and as their faith deepens they begin to prefer talk that is "dry" meaning not "boring" but "serious" (what does X mean, how do we know, how should this affect my life?).

There are basically two kinds of dry wines—red and white. The reds are served at room temperature, i.e., almost warm, while whites are served chilled, i.e., cold. A good collection has both. Thus, a good collection of wine is like a solid faith that has both hot and cool at the same time, in other words, a solid faith that inspires both passion and peace in equal measure.

A person knowledgeable about wine knows that different foods call for different wines. The idea is that the taste of the wine should complement the food and not overwhelm it. (White tends to go with white meats and fish; red tends to go with red meats and pastas.) Likewise, a person knowledgeable about faith knows which elements of his faith—which ideas—apply to different situations in his or others' lives. He knows what to think in order to maintain his or others' peace; he knows what faith does *not* demand.

Red wines need to breathe. In other words, once you open them they need to interact with the air so that the depth of their taste can emerge. This is much like faith, which must interact with the world in order to deepen. And how does this happen? We bring our faith into our life—into all our decisions and experiences.

The best labels refer to a place. Burgundy—if the wine really is from North East France—is a place. Chardonnay is a grape. (Any one can buy Chardonnay seeds and try to make wine.) To know for sure if a bottle was really produced in a renowned winemaking place, look for a phrase in small print in the language of the wine's origin and says essentially "controlled name." In the United States and most other places outside Europe, the phrase is "*Produced and Bottled*," not *Made and Bottled*, or *Cellared and Bottled*, and least of all *Vinted and Bottled*. ("Vinted" is not a word.) This honest and dishonest use of words reminds us of the one thing to look for when people say they love—sacrifice.

The Napkin

It's an old Italian custom. To show displeasure with a meal in a restaurant you refold your napkin and return it to its place. In effect, you are saying: "We wish we were never here." Consequently, to show satisfaction, you leave your napkin in a bundle. This is how you say: "We *were* here."

People want to feel they were there. They want to feel that they made a difference.

The problem is: In a world many billions, it's hard to see yourself as making a difference.

But the truth is: We are here to prepare ourselves for our life with God. We do this by embracing the faith that inspires the love that makes us more and more like God. Since this results in the only thing that lasts, it is the only thing that counts. What is more, every person must do it for him or herself. We can help (offer, plead, inspire...) but it is the person himself who must decide what he believes and begin to live it out.

This is the most important thing a person can do, and a person can do it only for himself.

The Finer Things

Curiously, the finer things you find on a table are rarely better for you.

Linen makes for an abrasive napkin.

Crystal is heavy.

Silver bends.

China radiates heat; it does not keep things hot.

The finer things you find on a table are rarely better for you. And we can say the same of the finer things that you might find in a jewelry- or toys-store, or in an automobile showroom.

On Salt

Salt is the only thing we eat that was never alive.

Communion, being the embodiment of the love of God so we can physically receive it, is the only thing we eat that was always alive.

A Point

This was supposed to be a big night out. I was very excited, and also a little nervous. I picked a French restaurant—because it would be quiet and elegant, and because I knew the menu would be in French and I would have to do the ordering.

Things were going well.

Finally, it came time to order. Trying to speak with my very best French accent, I said to waiter: “Pour la mademoiselle, Bœuf Bordelaise, et pour moi, Bœuf Bourguignon, a point.”

“A point?” he said to me. “Oui,” I replied, “a point.”

And now he responded, in his very best English, “It’s beef stew; you can’t have it medium.”

* * *

It’s faith; you can’t have it medium.

Grace before Meals

Bless us O Lord, and these Your gifts, which we are about to receive from Your goodness, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

or

Almighty God, we ask You to bless this meal and to bless us, and we ask You to remember those who do not have such good food or company to share this evening (today). We ask this in the name of the Father....