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Party Prep

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PARTY PREP

If something looks like it needs two bites, it probably does.

You're out of college and working at your first "real job." One day you receive in the mail an invitation to a reception and dinner. You accept the invitation and then panic when you realize you have no idea how to act or what silverware goes with which course. All of this fear and confusion can be eliminated by following a few simple rules.

The first thing to do is respond to the invitation, either verbally or in writing. When you receive a written invitation requiring R.S.V.P., do not ignore those four letters, Cawdron said. The invitation should give you an idea of what to expect at the event. It will state the place, time and occasion.

On the day of the event, remember it is just as bad to be early as it is to be late, Cawdron said. If the invitation says the reception is to be held from 6:30-7 p.m., arriving any time from 6:40-6:50 is appropriate. You do not want to catch the host off guard by arriving 10 minutes early, he said.

Once you arrive, move around the room and converse with different people; do not stand in one spot and wait for people to approach you. Always remember to shake hands with your right hand and make eye contact, as well. Cawdron advises to "practice your handshake before you go somewhere."

When food and drinks are served at the reception, hold your glass in your left hand, leaving your right hand available for shaking hands with other guests. As for hors d'oeuvres, "if something looks like it needs two bites, it probably does," Cawdron said.

Dining also can be panic- and faux pas-free.

First, leave your glass in the reception room. Hand it to a server or place it on a table or tray. Second, when you enter the room, you should remain standing until everyone has entered. And "gentlemen should always help ladies with their chairs," Cawdron said.

Many dinner tables will have place cards for seating. Do not move the place cards. They have been arranged in a certain manner by the host and should remain that way. After everyone has been seated, napkins should be placed in laps. Dinner napkins are to be unfolded halfway, either horizontally or diagonally.

The place setting and silverware often intimidate diners. According to Cawdron, the basic rule to follow is "start on the outside and work your way in." If you are not sure where to start, you should begin on the side with the odd number of pieces of flatware.

A few rules to remember during the meal include:

- Always pass things to the right
- Once you use a piece of silverware, do not place it back on the table
- Only butter one bite of bread at a time
- Never cut your bread, only break it

"Whatever you take, you must eat," Cawdron said. You should cut only one mouthful at a time and combine mouthfuls of all the different foods on your plate.

In the dining world, there are signals that you are done eating. If you lay your silverware on your plate and it is uncrossed, that means you would like some more food. When you are finished eating, lay your silverware side by side—almost on top of each other—on your plate.

The final step to an evening out is to write a thank-you note within the 48 hours following the function. If you wait much longer, people may forget which event you are referring to, Cawdron said. The note should be on a card with your monogram on the front. If you buy a thank-you note that says "thank you" on the front, you have nothing to write on the inside, he said.

Cawdron said 8,000 to 9,000 people visit The Knoll every year, and around 80 to 90 guests send thank-you notes. The notes are a reassurance that people had a good time, and they mean a lot to the host, he said.

Now that you know the proper way to behave at an event, from the invitation to the thank-you note, you have no need to panic when your next invitation arrives. Just remember, bad manners might mean you will not be invited back, and they may ruin your social life.

