Can an Etiquette Dinner Save This Man?

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What his mamma never taught him about forks.

Story by Paul Kix    Photography by Jeff Christian
mean, c'mon. Who goes to an etiquette dinner anyway? Is it the unrefined ogres who need it? No, they're too busy eating their Campbell's soup from the pot they cooked it in to notice the ad for the etiquette dinner in the Daily. Is it the boarding school-educated WASPs? No. Donald the Third knows the dinner table better than Pavarotti.

You want to know who goes to an etiquette dinner? Overachieving dweebs, that's who. The kind for whom a National Merit scholarship and a 4.0 and the presidency of the business club is not enough to land the perfect job and the trophy wife and the nice double-breasted worsted suit.

One must also study the art of the four-forked meal.

At least, these were my preconceptions before that fateful Sunday night. But so sure of them and disgusted by them was I that I signed up for the etiquette dinner, too. Unbiased accounts be damned.

The etiquette dinner was held in a room next to the Wallace-Wilson dining hall that was much too cold to do anything during the two-hour meal but shiver. After finding my table — more tables than I expected to see; let's say it in all — I looked at my watch: 5:26. I then set about exhausting the conversation starters with the Iowa State alum sitting across from me.

Conversation starters exhausted, I looked again at my watch: 5:31. The awkward silence that followed nearly made me forget how high the air conditioner was cranked. Nearly. Soon enough, however, four undergraduate and graduate students took their seats, and the conversation never flagged and rarely returned to me.

Charles Dobbs, an assistant to President Geoffroy was now one with the 75. And if I wasn't, I was at least number 76.

Besides, it's not like I can't use some help at the table. I have eaten my Campbell's soup straight from the pot I cooked it in. Using wheat bread as my napkin. With company over. In my Hanes.

Through this epiphany, Charles Dobbs spoke. Handshakes should be strong and grasped at the webbing between thumb and forefinger. Coats should be taken off when the host's coat is taken off. Food is to be passed around before eaten. Take out the olive pit with your fork instead of spitting it into your hands. On and on Charles Dobbs went. Don't talk too loud, or with your mouth too full, or with your hands while holding the steak knife. I didn't know where the journalism in my notes ended and the self-help began. When
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speaking, look at everyone paying attention. If you fart, don’t get the chili. If you’re a drunk, don’t get the wine.

And then it was time to “practice.” The somewhat dry roast beef and the cheesy potatoes I’d paid $7 for was put before me by beautiful women in white collared shirts and black slacks with hair pinned or bunned high above their shoulders. “Practice your table etiquette.” This is literally what the Schedule of Events had in mind for us.

Never before had I eaten a meal as aware of my eating the meal as I was on that air-conditioned night. I would say you could cut everyone’s painful self-consciousness with a knife, but I’m not sure a knife is the appropriate thing to use in this case. First, I wanted to reach for the salt and pepper but didn’t, thinking I’d better ask for it instead. Then I wondered if I should even do that. Do refined people use salt and pepper on their salads? The ranch dressing would have to be enough.

It was. It was the first to finish my salad. Is that good? If it isn’t, why? I was starving. The meal was my first since Domino’s earlier — way earlier — that morning. I would have also been the first to finish my grape juice — I was thirsty, too — but didn’t like the prospect of eating nothing and saying less, so I waited until the women with the waiter came around again, downed that quickly, and spent several moments thereafter wistfully swishing the juice around in my glass when I wasn’t eating the beef. I grabbed — yes, grabbed — the salt and pepper for that. It needed something.

Then, the unpleasantness. Having warmed to the crowd around me — two freshman, a junior, a graduate student and the alum — I shared my housing story, how I’d found a duplex and a cousin of a friend on Lincoln Way late last April for only “two hundred bucks a month. And that’s splitting utilities five ways!” I looked at my hands. They held the fork and knife that currently pointed at the alum. I touched my lips together. They hadn’t been a second earlier. That was because I was speaking WITH MY MOUTH FULL WHILE GESTURING WILDLY WITH UTENSILS. Charles Dobbs must do with me what he will.

Except he hasn’t done much yet. If anyone noticed I had disregarded two of the rules of Charles Dobbs’ society, they didn’t say anything to him, much less anybody, much less express anything at the table. These over-achieving dweeb are kind. My people. I’m number 76. I know to pass the bread before eating it.