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# Restaurant etiquette 101

- Story Highlights
- Call restaurant if you're more than 15 minutes late for reservation
- Tell hostess before sitting if you're unhappy with table
- If service was bad, talk to management about automatic gratuity
- If you can't eat entrees, make meal of hors d'oeuvres, side dishes

**(Real Simple)** -- Here are some strategies for dining out, from scoring a table to sending back food.

**Problem: The restaurant is fully booked.**

**Solution:** Put yourself on a waiting list. Don't be afraid to emphasize how much you want that table, as your eagerness may help persuade the staff to fit you in, even when they're booked.

You can also get lucky by checking the restaurant for cancellations around the time the staff may be calling to confirm parties for the evening (often before or after lunch). Surprisingly, weekends can be the best time to land these last-minute tables, as the reservation lines are not tied up by office assistants phoning in requests for their bosses. If you still can't snag a coveted Saturday-night table, consider making a reservation on a Wednesday or Thursday, when you're nearing the weekend

**Problem: You are running late and don't want to lose your reservation.**

**Solution:** Be sure to call if you're more than 15 minutes behind schedule. Be specific about what is delaying you: the babysitter, traffic, or a work meeting. And be clear on when you expect to arrive.

If you are so late that your table has been given away, apologize and ask, "Is there anything you can do for us?". Most restaurants get far more last-minute cancellations than they'd like to admit, so the chances are slim that there will be nothing available for you all night. Many restaurants also have at least one reserve table that they reluctantly bring out for unexpected situations.

If the restaurant truly cannot offer you a table, try eating at the bar, as you'll get a sense of the restaurant's items and the chef's style, and the food might even be cheaper. As a bonus, you can forge a relationship with the staff, increasing your likelihood of getting -- and keeping -- future reservations.

**Problem: You hate your table.**

**Solution:** Speak up quickly. Most hostesses say they prefer to know before a diner has been seated. Of course, you yourself may have no way of knowing if you're happy until the hostess walks away. In that case, don't waste your time complaining to the waiter. They don't decide where you sit.

Instead, find the hostess or the manager. If you don't, you have the waiter acting as a go-between, which is inefficient and annoying to the staff. Next, express your specific issue with the table -- too loud, too small, too central, too close to the bathroom -- and request a spot that better meets your needs.

Restaurant aficionados avoid this altogether by always letting the reservationists know where they prefer to sit when they book: a romantic corner for a special anniversary, or in the thick of things, for that out-of-town guest eager to take in the local color.

**Problem: The air-conditioning is blasting; you're freezing.**

**Solution:** Don't be disparaging; just explain that you're shivering. The restaurant should quickly figure out a way to warm you

up without overheating the other diners. It may mean changing your table. Or if you're female, it may mean bringing you a shawl to drape around your shoulders.

But few restaurants will lower the thermostat for one diner and risk making the others hot. And you shouldn't expect them to.

**Problem: So many menu options, so little time. Where should you begin?**

**Solution:** First, know the following: The top and bottom items on menus are usually things restaurants want to sell a lot of (they're getting a good cost-to-price ratio on them); the specials often include savory items the chef has plucked at the farmers' market or fish store and is eager to cook with; signature dishes are what the chef is known for (they are usually marked as such on the menu); and tasting menus (which generally consist of six to seven mini dishes and matching wines) are the best way to enjoy the full range of a chef's work.

That said, if you're still clueless, ask for the waiter's recommendation, but avoid questions like "Is the trout good?" says Philippa Rizopoulos, who waited tables at New York's beloved French oasis Tartine for four years. Instead, give the waiter a framework: "I'm in the mood for fish. Any suggestions?" or "The pasta looks amazing. Can you recommend two or three?"

**Problem: You're at a steak house. You want the chicken.**

**Solution:** Purists say that if you're in a steak house, it's always best to go with steak. The same holds for a fish restaurant. If you order something else, "don't expect to get the best meal the restaurant has to offer," says Mitchell Davis of the James Beard Foundation, a national nonprofit that grants scholarships and food awards to American chefs and authors.

Still, there should be at least one stellar dish that doesn't fit into the restaurant's theme. (Insiders say lobster is often the runner-up dish in a steak house.)

**Another option:** Go for a few hors d'oeuvres and forget a main dish altogether. Or, better yet, compile a meal by ordering a few side dishes. On a related note, if you are a vegetarian or have health-related dietary restrictions, it is best to inform the restaurant ahead of time, preferably when you place the reservation. A restaurant can often make special arrangements for diners who have given the kitchen plenty of advance notice.

**Problem: The waiter tells you all about the special but doesn't mention the price.**

**Solution:** A good way to get at the question without seeming rude is to ask, "What price point are the specials?" This phrasing is a little less specific and better than saying, "How much is that?" If you are with people you don't know well or are treating someone and don't want to seem stingy, keep in mind that specials are generally the same price as the more expensive menu items.

**Problem: You don't like your food and want to send it back to the kitchen.**

**Solution:** If you order a dish and it's not what the kitchen promised (too raw, noticeably overcooked), it's OK to send it back. All you need to say is "This isn't what the menu was offering. However, there is a fine line between speaking up and being a prima donna," warns Peggy Post, author of Emily Post's Etiquette, 17th Edition.

And if the issue is that you just remembered you don't like cream-based pasta sauces, the problem really is yours.

**Problem: You were part of a party of six, and the waiter tacked on an 18 percent gratuity. But the service was horrible. Can you have him take it off?**

**Solution:** Legally, this is a battle you might lose, because most state laws protect wait staff when it comes to a well-advertised mandatory tip for large parties. On your side, however, is the fact that the restaurant's management certainly doesn't want word of the below-par service to get out.

Get up discreetly, as if you were going to the bathroom, then ask to speak with the maître d' in a private spot. Don't start off belligerent, instead, offer specifics: It took a half hour to get menus; you asked for more bread three times to no avail; half your orders were wrong.

Assume that you and the maître d' have the same exacting standards when it comes to service, and bring up the restaurant's reputation. "I simply don't think this waiter met this restaurant's standards" is a good opening line.

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