
It Ain't Etiquette

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THE OTHER DAY I was having lunch with a friend at a restaurant particularly noted for its delicious soup. I had just begun to relish the flavor of my own bowl and was about to make some comment on it when I turned to find my friend rather furtively breaking crackers into his own. Now I would not have objected to such action, assuming, of course, that my friend really enjoyed the additional flavor of crackers in his soup, if he had not hastened to apologize for what he considered a serious, a monstrous breach of etiquette. His tone was as ashamed as if I had burst into his dining room to find him at the table wearing only his undershirt and trousers, his unnapkined face smeared with grease, and gnawed chicken bones strewn on the floor as if he had thrown them over his shoulder in the manner of Henry VIII. I could see in a moment that he was deadly in earnest and, feigning a kind of innocence of what is considered genteel *à table*, asked him why he apologized for an act which, in no way, could be thought repulsive or unsightly by even the most fastidious of diners. His reply was one that I expected: "It is not considered good etiquette," he said, as seriously as if he had just recited one of the Ten Commandments. It was then that I exploded. At the risk of having indigestion for the rest of the afternoon, I launched into a vigorous and, I will have to admit, angry rebellion against the ridiculous taboos to which society has fallen heir. Whence they came, no one seems to know, but they are so firmly entrenched in upper and middle class society that any breach is regarded in almost

the same light as the committing of petit larceny. I do not condone coarseness at the table, but its adversary, "delicacy," has risen to such prominence that if the Duchess of Tweedlebom were to give vent to a belch, no matter how tiny or how Bacchanalian, the scandal would be earth-shaking.

So it is with many of the practices at the table. The dictum is that when eating soup of the thin kind, the spoon must be pushed away from one, never in that barbarous fashion of moving it toward one's self. I am always reminded of a steam shovel when I see the automaton at the table laboriously pushing his spoonfuls of soup away from him and lifting the load to another location. The motion is as calculated, as methodical, as any excavating that was ever done. Fashion decries the licking of bones as an affront more appalling than that of appearing at the opera in dungarees. Which of you has not found extreme pleasure in nibbling at those elusive bits of meat on a pork chop which lie in the crevices no fork was ever designed to enter? The man who said, "The sweetest meat lies close to the bone" must have had pork chops in mind when he made his observation. Then, when one has reluctantly put his bone back on his plate only to seize it again for an unnoticed and final morsel, who can deny that a wistful licking of one's fingers is the ultimate satisfaction to be derived from a chop? Elbows on the dinner table, friends, if one would be influenced by the disapprobation of the high tribunal, is an indication of boorishness hardly to be countenanced in this age of gentility. On and on the taboos run. To be fully confident at the table, so complicated is the system, a book of rules should be laid beside the silver and the napkins as a handy reference for some point in doubt.

Who is to blame for this sad state of affairs? The question, put point-blank as it is, requires a point-blank answer. Emily Post, that denizen of the drawing room, that plutocrat of the breakfast table, is the insidious force undermining the gastronome's enjoyment of his repast. It is she who appeals to the finer instincts of a man to lift his teacup as if it were a bubble and not (heaven forbid!) as if it were a teacup. So universally is Miss Post accepted as the authority for what is right and wrong at the table, it is supposed that if she should suddenly go on record in support of hanging from a chandelier while one dines, the chandelier business would immediately flourish. I believe Miss Post's books on etiquette have reached many lands and many people through translations. It amuses me to consider what forms she would recommend for a group of etiquette-conscious head hunters about to sit down to dinner of roast missionary.

To one, such as myself, who places food high on the list of life's pleasures, being told how to transport it from plate to lips is a little like being told how to live. I wish Emily Post had been a painter.