

# Around the Dining Table



issued by  
The Extension Service  
Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas and  
The United States Department of Agriculture  
H. H. Williamson, Director, College Station, Texas

# Around the Dining Table

By  
Nora Ellen Elliott, Extension Specialist in Food Preparation  
and  
Dosca Hale, Extension Specialist in Child Development and Parent Education.

---

*"We thank thee Lord for this our food  
For life and health and every good,  
Let manna to our souls be given  
The bread of life sent down from  
Heaven."*

---

SEVERAL decades ago most American families gathered around the dining table three times a day. They experienced the ritual of saying a grace or "blessing"; then they partook of food. Today life is more hurried, mealtime is often irregular, attendance of the entire family is not mandatory, and the simple "offering of thanks" is too often forgotten.

The dining table of those days was a symbol of the unity and the unbroken relationship of the family. Because the pace of life was more leisurely people lingered over the table, discussed their mutual interests and conversed on affairs of the day. Every member of the family was ordinarily present for meals and promptness was encouraged.

With the fading of that scene in the American home, many people believe the family has in some respects lost its unity and that the hospitality for which the South was once particularly famous is on the wane. It is true that the old order must give way to the new, but in the transition ways must be found to meet the needs of modern

living and yet retain this family unity and spirit of hospitality.

To this end we dedicate this bulletin.

## Make Mealtime a Happy Occasion

Since in most homes the entire family can find time to gather around the dining table at least one or more times each day special thought should be given to making mealtime a joyous, happy occasion. There are some families so interested in doing this that they all read and study in order that they may be prepared to make a contribution to the conversation. They talk about things which are pleasant and interesting, often choosing topics from current news articles from the radio and from daily experiences.

Conversation thrives best in an atmosphere of order and harmony, and this atmosphere is most easily achieved by an attractively arranged table, by well-prepared food simply served, and by good manners practiced among family members. When all members of the family learn to share these re-

sponsibilities, mealtime may become such a happy occasion that no one wants to miss it.

To be attractive a table need not be set with expensive china, silver and linen. If these are carefully chosen and spotlessly clean their very simplicity will add much to the charm and dignity of the table.

### Here are Tips on Table Linens

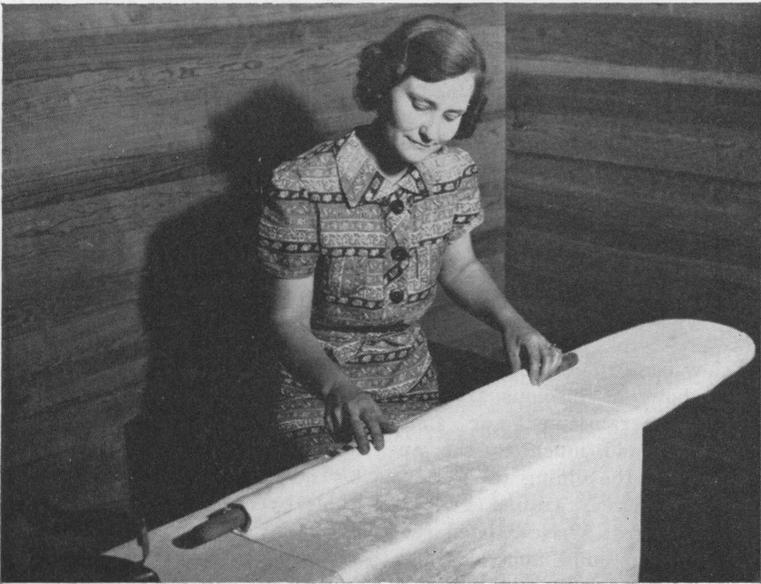
The table cover may be of oil cloth, cotton or linen, depending upon the budget allowance and the kind of dishes used. Rough cotton weaves look well with pottery dishes while the finer weaves are preferred for lighter china.

Doilies, runners, small luncheon cloths or oil cloth sets are often

used if the top of the table is well finished. Rectangular doilies and runners are preferred for a square-cornered table and oval ones for a round-cornered table.

When a luncheon cloth is used for breakfast or supper it may cover the table but need not hang over the edge. A full-sized table cloth is attractive for special family dinners or company meals. The cloth looks better when it hangs ten inches or more below the edge of the table.

When a table cloth is to be used it should have a silence cloth or pad under it. The silence cloth protects the table, deadens the noise from dishes and silver and makes the table cloth lie more smoothly. It should extend an inch or more over the edge of the



Roll table linens for easy storage.



Fresh flowers make an attractive centerpiece.

table and may be made from any thick white washable material such as an old blanket or quilted pad.

The table cloth should be placed over the silence cloth with the crease lengthwise in the center of the table.

### **Woods and Gardens Offer Table Decorations**

A low centerpiece of fresh flowers, a bowl of luscious fruits, a vegetable arrangement or small pot plants add much to the appearance of the dining table. Lacy mesquite leaves, grains, grasses, autumn leaves, berries, dried seed pods, spring buds and blossoms, carrot fern or small cacti make effective centerpieces.

If each person in the family will observe the materials afforded by his locality, gather some of these, discuss and experiment in arranging them, interesting table decorations can be provided the year round.

To lend a festive atmosphere to a simple meal candles are often added; however, they should be used only when artificial lights are needed.

### **Now Let's Set the Table**

The articles to be used at the table by one person and the space used for these are known as a "cover." In order to avoid overcrowding, usually 20 to 24 inches are allowed for each cover.

The silver, plate and napkin should be placed one inch from and on a line with the edge of the table to prevent accidents and give an orderly arrangement.

The knife is placed to the right of the up-turned plate with the cutting edge toward the plate. The forks, with tines up, are placed on the left, and spoons, with bowls up, on the right of the knife in the order of their use. For instance, if two spoons are needed, the soup spoon is placed on the outside since it is to be used first.

The water glass is placed on the right at the tip of the knife. The milk or iced tea glass is placed on the right of the water glass and a little nearer to the edge of the table.

When either the bread and butter plate or individual salad plate is used, it is usually placed at the tip of the fork and a little to the left. This arrangement helps to balance the water and beverage glasses.

The napkin is placed to the left with the open corner next to the fork and toward the edge of the table in order that one may remove and unfold it unobtrusively.

Salt and pepper shakers should be placed parallel to the edge of table and in a straight line with the glasses. Individual sets are placed in front of each cover.

In informal family table service the plates are stacked in front of the host convenient for serving.

Place chairs in front of the covers with the front edges of the seats on a line with the edge of the table cloth. This placement allows a person space in which to be seated without the confusion and noise of moving the chairs.

### **Place Serving Dishes and Silver Conveniently**

A table over-crowded with too many bowls and platters is not attractive. Arrange several foods on one platter and use a service cart or small table for extra bowls and dessert. The main platter is placed directly in front of the person serving, usually the man of the family.

Serving silver is placed on the table by the dish for which it is to be used with the serving spoon or carving knife to the right and the fork to the left.

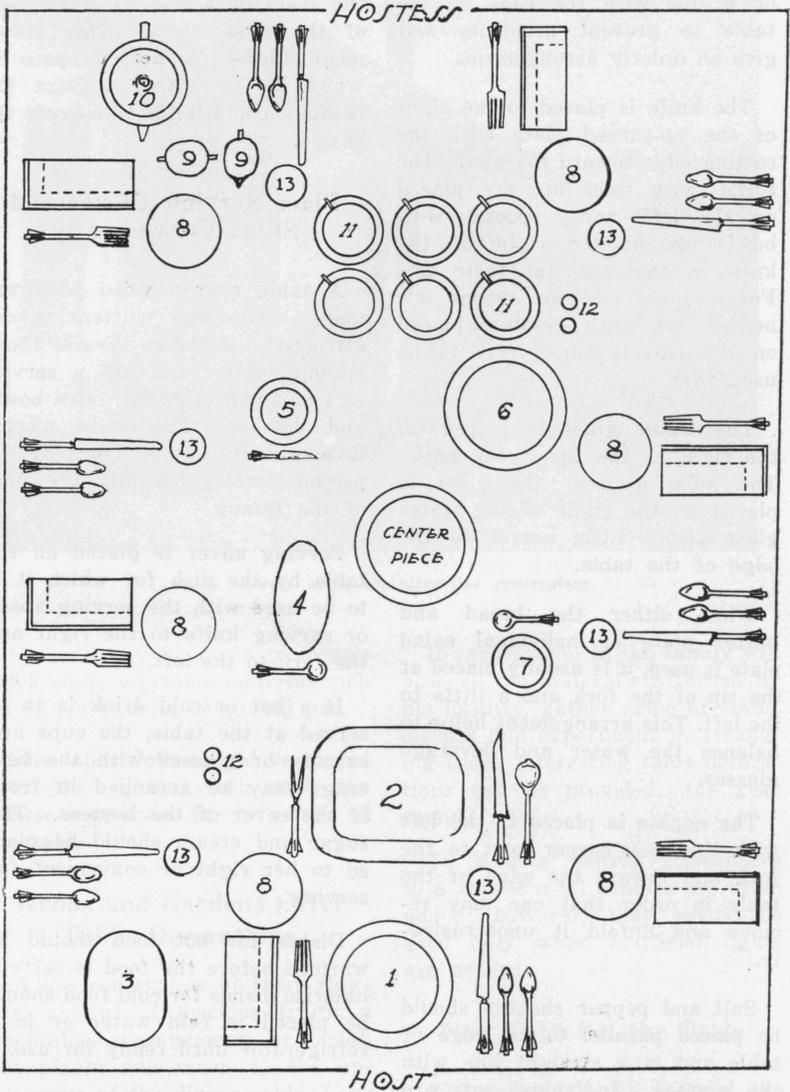
If a hot or cold drink is to be served at the table, the cups and saucers or glasses with the beverage may be arranged in front of the cover of the hostess. The sugar and cream should be placed to her right or convenient for serving.

Dishes for hot food should be warmed before the food is served; likewise dishes for cold food should be placed in cold water or in a refrigerator until ready for use.

### **Serve Cold Foods Cold and Hot Foods Hot**

Just before the meal is announced, fill water glasses two-thirds

# TABLE SET FOR DINNER



1. Warm Stacked Plates
2. Meat and Vegetable Platter
3. Other Vegetable Dishes
4. Gravy
5. Butter
6. Bread
7. Relish

8. Salad or Bread and Butter
9. Sugar and Cream
10. Beverage
11. Cups and Saucers
12. Salt and Pepper Shakers
13. Water

full and place bread, butter, relishes and any other cold foods on the table.

Stack the warmed dinner plates in front of the host.

The hot foods are brought in just before the family sits down so that they may be served piping hot.

### Make Family Table Service Simple and Orderly

Family table service should be simple, orderly and easily adapted to the needs of the family members and their friends. A thorough understanding of the accepted rules and customs of table service will help the family to develop a form of service which is distinctly its own.

The host is usually the father while the hostess is the mother.

If there are guests the host directs the way into the dining room while the hostess assigns the places. The guest, if a woman, is seated at the right of the host; if a man, he is seated at the right of the hostess.

All remain standing until the hostess gives the signal to be seated by sitting down herself. Each person sits down from the left of the chair and arises from the same side after the meal is over.

The hostess unfolds her napkin first, takes up silver to be used and thus gives the signal for eating.

The host does the carving and serves the meat or main dish, the potatoes and vegetables or, if preferred, the hostess or person next to the host may serve the vegetables or salad. The meat and veg-



The father serves the meat and vegetables while the mother serves the beverage or salad.



The mother remains at the table while the daughter waits on the table.

etables are placed on the top plate and the host asks that the first plate be passed either to the hostess or to the guest. There is less confusion and the service is more orderly when the hostess is served first.

After the first plate is passed to the hostess the host passes the second plate to his left, serving first the one on the hostess' right, and continues until all on that side are served. Then the host serves those to his right, and himself last. Some families feel it is more hospitable to pass the first plate to the guest instead of the hostess. The next plates are then passed around the table in whatever man-

ner is most convenient and orderly.

The beverage may be placed at each cover before or during the meal, or it may be served at the table by the hostess while the host is serving the main course. In the latter case the hostess passes to her left thus serving those on one side, while the host is serving the other side.

For those who prefer to begin serving to the right instead of the left, the above service is reversed.

If the host asks one what kind of meat he prefers, it is courteous to tell him.

When offering second servings the host or hostess may say, "May I serve you . . . .?", or, "Let me give you . . . ." This is better than saying, "Would you have 'more' coffee, or 'another' cup of coffee?"

A daughter or son should wait on the table since it is the mother's place to help the father direct the conversation and see after the comfort of her family and guests. Where there are no children in the family the hostess can plan the meal so that she leaves the table as little as possible.

When hot bread is brought from the kitchen the hostess is served first.

After the main course is finished a daughter or son rises and places partly folded napkin at the left of the plate. The food should be removed first, then the plates and unused silver. Start with the hostess when removing the soiled plates. It is easy to remember to remove and serve all dishes from the left with the left hand except the beverages which are placed and removed from the right.

The dessert may be served at the table by the host or hostess or brought in from the kitchen already served. If served by the host or hostess, the dessert, with the dishes and silver needed, is placed in front of the one serving as for the main course.

The hostess may serve the beverage with the main course or with the dessert.

The hostess should eat slowly in order to finish about the same time as the guests.

If it is necessary for one to leave early it is courteous to ask the hostess to excuse him.

The signal to arise from the table is given by the hostess when she places her napkin on the table and rises.

### **The Family Entertains with Buffet Service**

A large group can be served easily and informally in the home with buffet service. This type of service is ideal for community coffees, teas, yard or indoor parties and dinners.

For buffet service, the table may be most attractive yet simple and appropriate to the occasion if a little thought is given to planning it. The number to be served, the type of food prepared, and the type of service planned help to determine the setting of the table. Much originality may be shown in the arrangement, but first of all the food, silver, china and napkins should be placed on the table in a fashion that is orderly and convenient for serving.

Often the hostess selects a close friend or two to help the guests serve themselves. They may stand or sit while serving.

After the guests fill their plates they carry them to small tables placed about the house, or the plates may be held on their laps. When the occasion is a tea or reception the food may be eaten



Buffet table set for wedding reception.

while the guest stands near the place of serving.

### Kindness Is the Basis of All Good Manners

*Ceremonies are different in every country; but true politeness is everywhere the same—the result of Good Sense and Good Nature.*

—Goldsmith.

Robert Burns, the poet, was a plough-boy with no formal training in manners, but it is said that people all over the country envied his easy and graceful manner. This was because Burns had such a kindly feeling toward his friends and neighbors and he placed their comfort and well being before his own. If due consideration for others is joined with common sense and self-respect and practiced every day, good manners will be-

come a natural part of everyday living. Then on special occasions one will have no need to put on company manners which are awkward and insincere.

Pleasant manners have become customary and seem very natural for some people because through the years they have found those practices which make their relationships with other people more enjoyable. Each day they do those things which they find good and treat other people as they would like for other people to treat them.

Some consider manners important only in their relationships with friends and acquaintances. Are they not just as important in the home where people live together and see one another often? No doubt many of the difficulties of home life would be smoothed out

if those in the home practiced good manners every day—just being kind. One may fail in some things, but “Oh, Lord, let us not forget to be kind.”

## How Are Your Family Table Manners?

The table manners listed below are generally accepted in the United States. Check them and see if your family follows these simple suggestions.

1. The father or son removes the chair for the mother or daughter. Each sits naturally but does not lounge on the table.

2. It is customary to observe the hostess and follow her example.

3. Luncheon or dinner napkins are laid half folded across the lap to absorb foods or liquids that may be dropped.

4. When food is being passed one shows consideration by placing the serving silver—if any is used—into the dish and passing it with the handle convenient for the person next to him. If the hostess says, “Won’t you serve yourself to the bread and pass it?” then one serves himself first.

5. One uses the knife to cut food and to spread butter on small pieces of bread. The fork rather than the knife is used to carry food to the mouth because there is no danger of cutting the lips and less danger of dropping food into the lap. After the knife has been used it is placed across the upper right-hand corner of the

plate to prevent its being knocked off the table or soiling the table cloth.

6. Americans hold the fork in the right hand with tines up to carry food to the mouth. It is held in the left hand with tines down for cutting food. When not in use, place the fork on the plate beside the knife toward the edge of the table. In cutting food hold the knife in the right hand and the fork in the left, tines down, grasping the handles firmly and naturally. The end of the handle rests in the palm of the hand. The index finger extends along the handle to steady and guide the knife or fork. Cut just enough meat or other food for one or two bites at a time.

7. If a spoon is used to stir a beverage it is removed and placed on the saucer or on the plate before one drinks in order to prevent accidents. It is difficult to drink from a cup or glass unless the spoon has been removed.

8. Foods that are firm in texture and can be handled easily may be removed from the serving dish and eaten with the fingers. Some of these foods are celery, radishes, pickles, crackers, corn on the cob, cookies, olives, potato chips, nuts, most raw fruits and cakes with firm frostings.

9. One asks to have foods passed. Reaching may cause accidents or may disturb other people, and the food may be served more easily and orderly when each person who desires the food helps himself as it is passed.

10. At the table one talks after food has been swallowed in order to be understood, to prevent accidents and to avoid getting strangled. Eat slowly and quietly to avoid disturbing others.

11. When a new food is served each member of the family tastes it and thus learns to like nourishing, well-prepared foods. Children imitate their elders. If Dad likes vegetables and Mother drinks milk, it will be natural for the children to learn to like these foods.

12. If one wishes to place his arms on the table he places them immediately in front of himself rather than over the cover of the person sitting next to him. One makes it easier for those who are serving foods if he keeps his hands in his lap while the dishes and food are being served or removed from the table.

13. Some families prefer to have small children eat at their own table and learn to serve themselves; in other families small children eat at the table but are served small portions of less highly seasoned foods than those eaten by the adults.

Customs change so that what seems queer today may have been good form yesterday. Manners of other people, especially older people and people from other countries who have different customs, are criticized only by those who are ignorant or inconsiderate.

## The Family Observes Special Days

Finest traditions of family life may be preserved by observing birthdays, holidays, and other special occasions. Even though these celebrations are simple they strengthen the bonds of affection and companionship between members of the family. It is not the elaborateness of these occasions nor the gifts received which makes them memorable. Just being remembered and appreciated on a birthday or anniversary is compensation enough.

## Hospitality is First Essential

The key to successful entertaining has been and always will be—hospitality. While the importance of correct table service and table manners should not be minimized, these can be lifeless formalities unless they are sincere and natural. After all, manners are customs established to make life more simple and pleasant, not to complicate it. An atmosphere of friendliness draws people to a home and brings them back again; and more than that, it enriches the lives of the people who dwell there.

*The Beauty of the house is Order*

*The Blessing of the house is Contentment*

*The Glory of the house is Hospitality.*

—An old house blessing.