



ALL ABOUT NAPKINS

Suneeta Sodhi Kanga helps you handle yourself with grace and confidence whether dining with a friend, colleague or client



THE social graces of dining can prove to be a minefield. In this article, we will attempt to get you better acquainted with the table napkin. The word napkin is derived from the old French *naperon*, meaning little tablecloth. The first napkins were the size of today's bath towels. This size was practical because one ate the multi-course meal entirely with one's fingers. The ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans used them to cleanse their hands during a meal, which could last many hours. At many such meals, it was proper to provide a fresh napkin with each course to avoid the offensive sight of soiled napkins. By the 1700s, the French aristocracy had even promulgated rules of napkin etiquette, some of which we still use today. For example — we don't blow our noses into our napkins!

When in polite company, a napkin is to be used with a measure of etiquette, so as not to offend other diners through a display of bad manners. (You are excused from these rules only when the napkin you are offered is one of those flimsy paper things that pop out of tabletop dispensers — the kind of 'napkin' you cannot place on your lap.) For formal dining, there is the cloth napkin, the paper napkin being reserved for more informal settings. On the table, the napkin could be placed to the left or beneath the forks, on the plate or in a wine glass.

Cloth napkins come in several sizes, each size tailored to a specific use. A beverage napkin, used when serving drinks and hors d'oeuvres, like most cloth napkins, is square — about five inches on each side. A luncheon napkin is a couple of inches larger, and a dinner napkin larger still. The theory, evidently, is that the more food and drink served, the more potential there is for spillage, so the bigger the napkin.

Today, in all dining situations, as soon as you sit down the napkin is properly picked up and unfolded on the lap, not above the table level. If you don't do this quickly enough, the waiter will do it for you.

If there is a napkin ring it must be slipped off and placed on the top left hand side of the place setting (Remember: all solids are placed on the left and liquids on the right).

The place for a napkin? On your lap! It is not tucked into your pants, nor does it belong tucked into your shirt collar—bibs are meant for under-three year olds! However, if you are in a restaurant (Seafood, Tepanyaki, etc.) where that kind of behavior is acceptable, don't be afraid to go along.

When you're given a napkin, use it. Don't let it sit beside your plate. It was given to you for wiping your mouth when you need to and to protect your lap from spills. Leaving it beside your plate marks you a slob.

The host usually picks up and unfolds his napkin first. In polite society, movements at the dinner table tend to be small, so don't make any



ostentatious displays like wildly shaking the napkin to open it. Just unfold it without any fuss.

A dinner napkin is folded in half with the fold facing the body so that when you wipe your hands, you can use the top layer and there is still another layer below protecting your clothes. A tea napkin may be opened completely. If the napkin is larger than your lap, fold it such that it just covers your lap. The napkin is then considered to be your property until you complete the meal and leave the table.

Diners should gently blot or dab their mouths with their napkins frequently during the meal, but they should not wipe their mouths as if it is a wash cloth you use during your morning shower. If a diner needs to take something out of his mouth, such as a fruit pip, stone or bone, he should not spit it into his napkin; rather, he should remove it surreptitiously with his fork or spoon or finger while covering his mouth with the napkin.

Should you have to leave the table during the meal, leave the napkin, loosely folded, on your seat.

When the meal is finished and it is time to leave the table, diners should lay their napkins neatly beside their plates, on the left side. If servers have removed the plates, diners may place their napkins in the now-empty space in the middle that their plates had occupied. Refolding the napkin is bad etiquette, because someone may believe it to be unused and clean. Crumpling it into a ball is also bad etiquette, because it looks messy.

Remember: Don't wait for the food to be served before you open your napkin. Should your napkin still be sitting on the table when the food arrives, the server may have to create space to set your plate.

Your napkin stays on your lap while you eat. It is returned to the table only at the conclusion of the meal when everyone is finished with their meal — not when you are done.

Note: A high-thread-count, white, linen or linen-cotton mix damask napkin is still considered the zenith of elegance. ☑