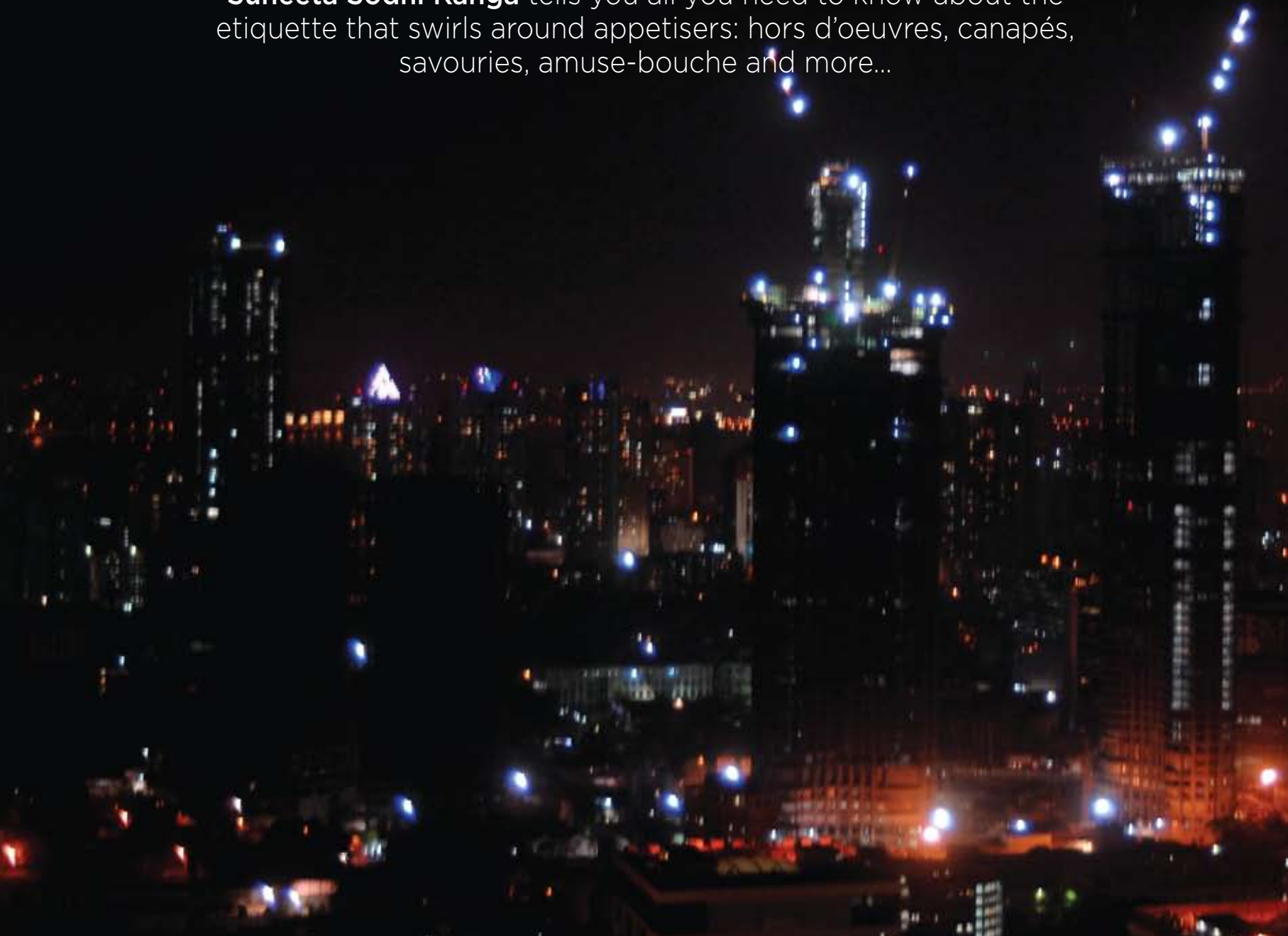


Starters and snacks!

Suneeta Sodhi Kanga tells you all you need to know about the etiquette that swirls around appetisers: hors d'oeuvres, canapés, savouries, amuse-bouche and more...



FOOD eaten to pique the appetite or to moderate the hunger stimulated by drinks are called appetisers. They are small in quantity but very high in quality. Some of the most expensive ingredients are used to prepare appetisers. Hors d'oeuvres, amuse-bouche, crudités and canapés are some of the names used for appetisers. Hors d'oeuvres are small portions of savoury foods, often highly seasoned. They may be served at the dinner table as a part of the meal, or they may be served before seating. Hors d'oeuvres prior to a meal are usually rotated by waiters. Though any food served prior to the main course is technically an hors d'oeuvre, the phrase is generally limited to individual items, not crudités, cheese or fruit. For example, a glazed fig topped with mascarpone is considered an hors d'oeuvre, whereas figs on a platter are not.

An amuse-bouche is a single, bite-sized hors d'oeuvre. The term is literally translated as 'mouth amuser'. The amuse-bouche as an identifiable course arose during the nouvelle cuisine movement, which emphasised smaller, more intensely flavoured courses. It differs from other hors d'oeuvres in

that it is small, usually just one or two bites, and pre-selected by the chef. Often accompanied by a complementing wine, amuse-bouche is offered free of charge to all present at the table.

The functional role of the amuse-bouche could be played by rather simple offerings, such as a plate of olives or a crock of tapenade. It often becomes a showcase of the artistry of the chef. As Jean-Georges Vongerichten, a popular New York celebrity chef once said, "The amuse-bouche is the best way for a great chef to express his or her big ideas in small bites".

Crudités are traditional French appetisers consisting of sliced or whole raw vegetables which are sometimes dipped in a vinaigrette or other dipping sauce. Crudités often include celery sticks, carrot sticks, bell pepper strips, broccoli, asparagus spears and even olives, depending on local custom.

Party etiquette

Appetisers are almost always served before the main courses. Here are some tips on consuming appetisers:

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- If you don't have a plate, hold your cocktail napkin beneath the item to catch any drops that may fall. Decline graciously if the foods look very messy, dippy or drippy. Murphy's Law will ensure that the drip lands on the most difficult or expensive-to-clean article of clothing you happen to be wearing!
- Two great things to keep in mind while at the buffet table: after helping yourself, step back at least four steps to avoid eating over the table or blocking others. When at a formal event where the tables are set for dinner, appetisers are meant to be enjoyed away from the table. It's gracious to allow all the guests to see a clean table when they sit down to enjoy dinner with you.
- Nuts are eaten with the fingers. At the table, a nut spoon is provided to spoon nuts from the bowl to the plate. Use the spoon to take nuts from the common bowl, not your fingers (this rule applies to any unwrapped food served in a common bowl).
- Olives can be eaten with your fingers when they are served as an hors d'oeuvre or garnish. Eat small olives whole and large olives in two bites. Olives with pits are held in the fingers and eaten in several bites; the stones are then deposited into a cupped hand and placed on the side of your plate, in an ashtray or into a paper napkin. In a recipe, such as a casserole, olives are eaten with a fork.
- At a cocktail party, afternoon tea or reception, canapés are finger foods but when a canapé is served as a first course at the table, for example, a light pastry filled with vegetables, proper dining etiquette calls for eating it with a knife and fork.
- Crackers or chips are not greasy so they are eaten with the fingers. At formal meals, toasted crackers are served with cheese and are placed on the edge of the plate or tablecloth and eaten a bite at a time.
- When served satays, kebabs or shashliks as passed hors d'oeuvres, you can eat them while holding the skewer. If, however, they are served on a plate, you should first use a fork to slide the food off the skewer onto your plate, before eating it with that same fork.
- Don't drown your appetisers in chutneys, sauces and dips.
- Crudités are dipped into the accompanying sauce only once. Never 'double dip' into the common bowl. Spoon the dip on to your small hors d'oeuvre plate, then you may 'triple dip' if you so please!
- Hors d'oeuvres served at the table as a first course are eaten with a knife and fork.



Pics: Nalin Solanki

- Whether appetisers are being passed on trays or if you're helping yourself from a buffet, as you're taking only one or two at a time, a napkin can substitute easily for a plate. With three or more items, a plate is necessary.
- Don't fill your plate to overflowing. People seldom notice you going back for seconds at large cocktail functions; but they will notice the mountainous heap on your plate!
- Transfer all foods including dips first to your plate and then carefully to your mouth.
- Even though a one-bite food means you will never be guilty of double-dipping, it's considered good manners for anything you're eating to touch your plate prior to it reaching your lips!
- Before popping gooey appetisers of any kind in your mouth, hold the food slightly above your plate and silently count to three. That brief delay will ensure any drippage ends up on your plate and not your clothing.

End note

What one does with the toothpicks used in many canapés and crudités baffles most of us.

Men have been seen putting them in their pockets (and in potted plants!), women putting them in their purses and flower arrangements, and men and women both putting them back on the tray the next time the server circles the room.

There is a better way...

If there are no receptacles or tables around, wrap the toothpicks in your napkin and hold in your left hand. When a waiter comes by for clearing glasses you can dispose of them on the same tray. ☺