



THE RITUALS OF DINNER



THE ORIGINS,
EVOLUTION,
ECCENTRICITIES,

AND MEANING OF
TABLE MANNERS

Winner of the International Association of
Culinary Professionals Award for Literary Food Writing

MARGARET VISSER

"Read this book... You'll never
look at a table knife the same way again."

—Molly O'Neill, *The New York Times Book Review*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Visser taught Classics for eighteen years at York University in Toronto. She is the author of *Much Depends on Dinner*, winner of the 1990 Glenfiddich Award for the Food Book of the Year. *The Rituals of Dinner* won the International Association of Culinary Professionals Award for Literary Food Writing and the Jane Grigson Prize in 1991. Her most recent book is *The Way We Are*. She is well-known in Canada as a television and radio personality.

For Emily and Alexander

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Introduction

*T*his book is a commentary on the manifold meanings of the rituals of dinner; it is about how we eat, and why we eat as we do. Human beings work hard to supply themselves with food: first we have to find it, cultivate it, hunt it, make long-term plans to transport and store it, and keep struggling to secure regular supplies of it. Next we buy it, carry it home, and keep it until we are ready. Then we prepare it, clean it, skin, chop, cook, and dish it up. Now comes the climax of all our efforts, the easiest part: eating it. And immediately we start to cloak the proceedings with a system of rules. We insist on special places and times for eating, on specific equipment, on stylized decoration, on predictable sequence among the foods eaten, on limitation of movement, and on bodily propriety. In other words, we turn the consumption of food, a biological necessity, into a carefully cultured phenomenon. We use eating as a medium for social relationships: satisfaction of the most individual of needs becomes a means of creating community.

Table manners have a history, ancient and complex: each society

has gradually evolved its system, altering its ways sometimes to suit circumstance, but also vigilantly maintaining its customs in order to support its ideals and its aesthetic style, and to buttress its identity. Our own society has made choices in order to arrive at the table manners we now observe. Other people, in other parts of the world today, have rules that are different from ours, and it is important to try to comprehend the reasoning that lies behind what they do if we are to understand what we do and why.

For in spite of the differences, table manners, all things considered, are remarkably similar both historically and the world over. There is a very strong tendency everywhere to prefer cleanliness or consideration for others or the solidarity of the dining group. Ritual emphases on such matters are occasionally highly idiosyncratic. But most rituals with these meanings have a good deal in common, and when people do things differently they usually do them for reasons that are easy to understand and appreciate. Sometimes, for example, festive diners are expected to eat a lot. Feasts are exceptional occasions, and a great deal of work has gone into them: the least a guest can do is show enjoyment. Fasting beforehand may very well be necessary, and exclaiming with pleasure, smacking one's lips, and so on might be thought both polite and benevolent. Other cultures prefer to stress that food is not everything, and guzzling is disgusting: restraint before the plenty offered is admired, and signifying enjoyment by word or deed is frowned upon. Sometimes it is correct to be silent while eating: food deserves respect and concentration. In other cases one must at all costs talk: we have met not merely to feed, but to commune with fellow human beings. Even though we come down on one side or the other, we can sympathize with the concerns that lie behind the alternative choice of action.

The book is organized neither chronologically nor by culture and geography. I have elected rather to "travel," both in space and in time—to choose examples of behaviour from other places and periods of history wherever they throw light, whether by similarity or by difference, upon our own attitudes, traditions, and peculiarities of behaviour. My aim has been to enrich anyone's experience of a meal in the European and American tradition, to heighten our awareness and interest on the occasions when we might be invited to share

meals in other cultures, and to give the reader some idea of the great range of tradition, significance, and social sophistication which is inherent in the actions performed during the simplest dinner eaten with family or friends.

The two opening chapters deal with basic principles. The first of these considers why it is that every human society without exception obeys eating rules; what ritual is and why we need it at dinner (cannibalism, for instance, is found to conform to strict laws and controls); and the meaning of feasting and sacrifice. The second chapter is about how people the world over teach children table manners, and how our own culture evolved its dinner-time etiquette. We have insisted more and more strictly on bodily control; and we have often used table manners to serve class systems and snobbery.

Chapter Three starts to take us through a meal eaten in company with others: the etiquette of invitations, the laws governing hosts and guests, behaviour on arriving at somebody's house for dinner, and the seating arrangements. The dinner we are about to share is a sit-down meal with friends, some of them intimate and some only slight acquaintances; the party takes place in the host's house. Such a meal invariably includes comfort, risk, and significance, complexity, plotting, setting, and dramatic structure enough to supply ample material for a book-length commentary. We necessarily leave out not only the specific menu of our meal, but also the characters and stories of individual guests, their preferences, conversation, and idiosyncrasies—everything that makes each dinner party different from every other. In this book we shall be concerned merely with conventions, where they come from, and what they signify.

"Dinner Is Served" in the course of the long central Chapter Four. We watch each other eat a meal, from first bite to leaving the table and then the house for home. In order to understand our manners, we must consider what they might have been and are not. Sitting on chairs round a table to eat is not necessarily "the way it's done"—why then did we decide to do it? How do people behave who do without chairs? When and why did we stop eating with our hands, what does that decision tell us about our attitude to food, and what difference has it made to our eating behaviour? How do we account for tablecloths, candles, serving spoons, wineglasses, and for

ceremonials such as saying grace or toasting? Even though many people may eat formal sit-down dinners rarely or not at all, the fully deployed formal meal remains the paradigm from which other food events borrow their symbols, sequences, and categories. Picnics, airline dinners, cocktail parties, and fast-food breaks are among such variants discussed in the book. They reveal, in the very changes rung or in their choice of quotations from the original, many of our attitudes towards food rituals.

Restaurant meals are an immensely complex subject that I have had, regretfully, to treat only tangentially. For the most part, eating in a restaurant requires the same table manners as those expected at a fairly formal dinner at home. (Readers interested in pursuing the social issues raised by the topic might start with the books by J. Finkelstein, and G. Mars and M. Nicod, listed in the Bibliography.)

The reason why I chose to describe a formal meal is its fullness—it covers the broadest range of activities—and its intricacy. Informality, as the word tells us, presupposes at least some concept of a formal model, and informal behaviour is to be understood in the first place by considering the rules that it disregards, and then seeing what rules it invariably retains.

Chapter Five is a detailed treatment of bodily propriety when eating: control above all of the mouth, but of the rest of the body as well. It is at this point that pollution avoidances during meals are briefly discussed. The final postscript addresses itself to the so-called falling off of manners and ritual in modern Western society; it considers why we are so determined to be casual, and whether we are in fact ruder than we used to be.

The themes of violence and repression necessarily recur in the narrative. Table manners are social agreements; they are devised precisely because violence could so easily erupt at dinner. Eating is aggressive by nature, and the implements required for it could quickly become weapons; table manners are, most basically, a system of taboos designed to ensure that violence remains out of the question. But intimations of greed and rage keep breaking in: many mealtime superstitions, for example, point to the imminent death of one of the guests. Eating is performed by the individual, in his or her most personal interest; eating in company, however, necessarily

places the individual face to face with the group. It is the group that insists on table manners; "they" will not accept a refusal to conform. The individual's "personal interest" lies therefore not only in ensuring his or her bodily survival, but also in pleasing, placating, and not frightening or disgusting the other diners. Edward Lear was extremely sensitive to the relationship between the eccentric individual and "them," the unnamed others:

There was an Old Person of Buda
 Whose conduct grew ruder and ruder;
 Till at last, with a hammer,
 They silenced his clamour,
 By smashing that Person of Buda.

He was, "they" will claim later, asking for it. The limerick, light-hearted as it is and hilarious in its finality, nevertheless delivers a sinister warning that is impossible to miss. Manners, and table manners in particular, are no laughing matter. Good manners help make our own lives easier because they set other people at ease. What other people consider to be bad manners—and politeness has everything to do with the perceptions of other people—never escape punishment, sooner or later, from "them."

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1

Behaving

Table manners are as old as human society itself, the reason being that no human society can exist without them. The active sharing of food—not consuming all of the food we find on the spot, but carrying some back home and then doling it systematically out—is believed, even nowadays, to lie at the root of what makes us different from animals. Birds, dogs, and hyenas carry home food for their young until they are ready to find food for themselves, and chimpanzees may even demand and receive morsels of meat from other adults in their pack. (Chimpanzees apparently exhibit this behaviour only on the occasions when they consume meat; their main, vegetable diet they almost invariably eat where they find it, without sharing.) Only people actively, regularly, and continuously work on the portioning out of their food.

This activity presupposes and probably helped give rise to many basic human characteristics, such as kinship systems (who belongs with whom; which people eat together), language (for discussing food past, present, and future, for planning the acquisition of food,

and deciding how to divide it out while preventing fights), technology (how to kill, cut, keep, and carry), and morality (what is a just slice?). The basic need of our stomachs for food continues to supply a good deal of the driving force behind all of human enterprise: we have to hunt for food, fight for it, find it, or sow it and wait for it to be ready; we then have to transport it, and distribute it before it goes rotten. It is in addition easier for us to ingest food chopped, ground, cooked, or left to soften. Civilization itself cannot begin until a food supply is assured. And where food is concerned we can never let up; appetite keeps us at it.

The active sharing out of what we are going to eat is only the beginning. We are ineradicably choosy about our food: preference enters into every mouthful we consume. We play with food, show off with it, revere and disdain it. The main rules about eating are simple: If you do not eat you die; and no matter how large your dinner, you will soon be hungry again. Precisely because we must both eat and keep on eating, human beings have poured enormous effort into making food more than itself, so that it bears manifold meanings beyond its primary purpose of physical nutrition. It becomes an immensely versatile mythic prototype (modern economists, for example, love to assure us that our longing to "consume" goods in general, like our need to eat, is insatiable), an art form, a medium for commercial exchange and social interaction, the source for an intricate panoply of distinguishing marks of class and nationhood. We have to keep eating, so we make eating the occasion for insisting on other things as well—concepts and feelings which are vital for our well-being, but many of them complex, difficult to analyse or understand, and definitely not so easy to concentrate on as food is when we are hungry. Even where actual eating is concerned, bread alone is not enough.

"Bread," in western European languages, often means food in general; in our tradition, bread is basic. This is true even in our own day, when people eat far less bread than they used to, and when bread often comes to us from a factory, bleached, squishy, ready-cut (so much for "breaking bread"), wrapped in plastic or cellophane. Yet we still expect to have bread on hand at every meal, as background, as completion, as dependable comforter and recompense

for any stress or disappointment the rest of the meal might occasion. Bread is for us a kind of successor to the motherly breast, and it has been over the centuries responsible for billions of sighs of satisfaction.

Because we are human and because, as we shall see, “cultural” behaviour appears in us to be a “biological” necessity, bread became in addition, and has remained, a deeply significant symbol, a substance honoured and sacred. We still remember that breaking bread and sharing it with friends “means” friendship itself, and also trust, pleasure, and gratitude in the sharing. Bread as a particular symbol, and food in general, becomes, in its sharing, the actual bond which unites us. The Latin word *companion* means literally “a person with whom we share bread”; so that every *company*, from actors’ guild to Multinational Steel, shares in the significance evoked in breaking bread.

Food can be shared, abstained from, used as a weapon or a proof of prestige, stolen, or given away; it is therefore a test of moral values as well. Everyone understands exactly what going without food will mean: food is the great necessity to which we all submit. We also share a similarity in stomach size—no matter how much money you have, there is only so much you can eat. So, food metaphors are numerous and powerful in moral and aesthetic discourse; we speak of “greed,” “taste,” and “thirst” in contexts that seem to have little to do with eating and drinking. Women have always been another symbol, used for the knitting together of families and tribes; they too are “given away” in marriage, shared, stolen, used to enhance status, or abstained from. But food, as the anthropologist Raymond Firth pointed out, has the enormous advantage, as a symbol, of divisibility. “Women can be shared but they cannot be divided, whereas food can be almost infinitely portioned out without loss of quality.” The remark is amusing because it is, so to speak, “close to the bone.” Somewhere at the back of our minds, carefully walled off from ordinary consideration and discourse, lies the idea of cannibalism—that human beings might *become* food, and eaters of each other. Violence, after all, is necessary if any organism is to ingest another. Animals are murdered to produce meat; vegetables are torn up, peeled, and chopped; most of what we eat is treated with fire;