

THE MERE MORTAL'S GUIDE TO *Fine Dining* By Colleen Rush

Reviewed By Ruth Taber

IS it ok to use your fingers in a fine restaurant? Should you tip the sommelier (wine steward)? With seventeen pieces of flatware in front of you – which fork or spoon should you start with? Is it ok to ask for a “doggy bag” in a fine restaurant?

Colleen Rush answers these and many other questions in her breezy new book, *The Mere Mortal's Guide to Fine Dining* (Broadway Books, \$12.95). No need to feel intimidated or anxious about committing a “fine-dining crime”; Rush covers it all.

Table manners? Rush assumes you've learned the basics but suggests it's easy to “forget some of the finer points of dining etiquette when you eat most of your meals out of Styrofoam boxes.” Sample tips: “Keep your elbows, car keys, purse..... personal doodads off the table....pass the salt and pepper together (diners won't have to look for orphaned shakers)....don't blow on your food to cool it off. If it's too hot to eat....wait. Take small bites....avoid asking other diners questions when they're busy chewing.” If a piece of food or veggie accidentally falls on the floor, don't pick it up. “Staff is trained to deal with spills....if the mishap goes unnoticed, simply call it to your waiter's attention.”

Cell phones get a section of their own. “Do not dial or answer calls at the table....if you absolutely must make or take a call, excuse yourself,” she writes. Good excuses: faking a trip to the bathroom or offering a worthy reason, such as, “the hospital just called; I think they might've found my kidney match.” Get the picture? Classy people turn off their phones when they're dining out.

Finished your main course? Savvy diners know their place setting will be cleared if they rest their fork tines-up and knife blade-in – handles resting at five o'clock and tips pointing at ten o'clock – on the plate. If you're just resting between mouthfuls, “lay your utensils vertically on either side of your plate”.

A chapter on today's hottest chefs will elevate your culinary status and allow you to chit-chat like a maven about haute, nouvelle, green cuisine and “who's who in fine dining.”

Does the restaurant's wine list resemble a phone book full of “unpronounceable names, châteaux and dates that mean nothing to you?” As a “mere mortal” your goal is choosing a good wine at “a price you can afford – whether you choose it yourself or get help from the sommelier.” Rush suggests you ask the sommelier for a suitable accompaniment to your meal choice, saying “I'd like to spend around \$\$ for a bottle.” If you don't want everyone at the table to know your wine budget, point (discreetly) to a reasonably priced bottle on the list and ask: “Is there something in this range you can recommend to go with our meal?”

Chapter 6, “Pasture to Plate – the best of four-legged, feathered and finned food” is a helpful guide for both restaurants and food markets. One section, “If You Dare To Go There,” lists variety meats such as “joue” or “guancia” (French or Italian for animal cheeks) as well as foreign terms for tongue, heart, sweetbreads and other “goodies.”



Cardoons, fiddleheads, ramps? Rush describes “Freaky Veggies Restaurants Love to Serve.” She advises that artichokes contain a compound that can make other food and wine taste sweet and the same compound in asparagus can make your wine taste bitter and metallic. Nice to be aware of this before you spend big bucks on your Cabernet Sauvignon.

The cheese course, a tradition in fine European dining, has crossed the pond and spawned a new generation of specialized cheese foodies. “How to Fit le Fromage Into a Full-Course Meal” describes the order (light to stronger tasting) for eating cheese served after the main course and before (or as an alternative to) dessert.

Rush believes the best consumer is an educated one. Whether dining with a prospective employer, your girlfriend's parents, a client, or good friends, this wonderful book paves the way for “mere mortals” to eat, drink and be merry at the finest restaurants in the country. Bon appétit! ✨

- **Finger food or not:** “Bones that have been Frenched (meat cut away to reveal the bone as in a rack of lamb) are finger-approved as are artichoke leaves, unsauced asparagus stalks, olives, cornichons (small pickles) corn on the cob, strawberries with stems attached....it is not polite to nibble food speared on your fork....don't lift anything on a fork to your mouth if you can't eat it in one bite.
- **Tipping the sommelier:** 15 to 20% of the wine tab, “if he/she has been helpful in selecting a great, reasonably priced bottle for the table.”
- **Choosing the right fork/spoon:** Hard to go wrong if you follow the “outside to inside” rule; “servers at high-end restaurants typically set, remove and replace tableware as it's needed” eliminating much of your guesswork.
- **Taking leftovers home:** Absolutely not if you're having dinner with a prospective employer, your boss, client or anyone you're trying to impress. Other times take a cue from others at the table and leave the goodies on the plate if no one else is taking leftovers home.

The Mere Mortals Guide to Fine Dining is available at amazon.com and bookstores everywhere. Ruth Taber is a member of the International Association of Culinary Professionals. She may be reached at rtaber@elp.rr.com.