

## The Secret of the Formal Place Setting

by Emily Pillar

There is a general consensus among writers of etiquette manuals that too many people are afraid they will fail to choose the proper utensil for the appropriate stage of the meal. Book after book provides reassurance on this point: use the outermost utensil or utensils, as necessary, one set for each course, and you can't go wrong (unless the table has been improperly laid to start out with).

For a formal place setting, you will receive exactly as much silverware as you will need, arranged in precisely the right order. Good etiquette requires you to assume (and this ought to ease most people's worries) that the host has correctly assigned each utensil to its task, rather than attempt to point out that a fish fork is improperly being supplied for your salad. As each course is finished, the silverware will be removed with the dish, leaving you with a clean slate, all ready for the next item to arrive. Common sense forbids arranging battalions of forks and knives at the sides of the plate, so on the extremely rare occasions that more than three or four courses are planned, new silverware will be brought to you after all of the original setting has been used.

In this 1902 photograph from Mrs. Seely's Cook-Book (with Chapters on Domestic Servants, their Rights and Duties), the proper place setting shown is little different from modern examples. The plate in this setting is known as a "service plate," and is never actually eaten from. It will either be removed when the first course is brought, or the dish will be set on top of it. A person faced with this array can expect to dine on:



### **Oysters, as appetizer**

Use the small fork angled into the soup spoon at right. This is the one exception to the rule of placing forks to the left of the plate.

### **Soup**

The soup spoon is commonly the only spoon provided for the initial place setting.

### **Salad**

Note the thicker tine at the left of the fork, which strengthens the tool -- for right handed people -- for use in cutting large salad greens without having to resort to the knife.

### **Fish**

Both a fork and a knife are provided for fish. Sometimes the fish knife has a silver blade, because fish, which is often served with lemon, reacts with the steel in old knife blades, causing an unpleasant taste (the recent invention of stainless steel has made this problem obsolete). The fish fork is usually shorter than the meat fork.

### **Meat**

The inner fork and knife are provided for the meat course of the meal.

### **Dessert**

In this case, the dessert utensils will be brought in with the dessert. However, you may encounter the dessert spoon -- and fork, if needed -- as part of the initial place setting. They would be placed horizontally over the plate and parallel to each other, with the bowl of the spoon pointing to the left and the tines of the fork pointing right. When coffee and tea are served, a teaspoon will be provided; it is brought in on the saucer.

*The "Ultimate Etiquette Authority," Emily Pillar has recently published Weddings, her second book on good manners.*