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BUSINESS CASUAL

To dine or not to dine, that is the question

If you decide to accept an invitation to a business dinner, make sure you brush up on your etiquette before the important event.

BY BRETT GRAFF
Special to The Herald

When it comes to business dinners, there are a million nuances to master. But the most critical, according to some local executives, is how to effortlessly avoid them.

Dinner isn't just lunch with larger portions and a wine list. Executives must learn to negotiate the potential minefield of a business dinner and develop the skill to determine whether a martini with dinner will make them a buddy or just a buffoon.

What's more, deals are rarely sealed in the dining room, says Francisco Gonzalez, the director of the international services group at the Adorno & Yoss law firm. "They're great for getting close to a person, but I doubt how effective they are," he says.

Plus dinner is an hour that some consider sacred.

"Dinner is private time," says Adrienne Arsht, chairman of the board at Miami's TotalBank and a prolific host of meals, including social dinners with executives at her sprawling home. "Dinner is not during the workday -- which includes time for breakfast, lunch, and a drink."

But while some executives say avoidance is the best policy, business dinner escapes aren't always possible or even desirable.

KNOW WHAT TO SAY

So what to do when an associate phones and suggests hammering out the details of a deal over what you'd consider a dreaded, and certainly not career-boosting, dinner?

"It's perfectly acceptable to say simply, 'I'm committed in the evenings,'" says Corby O'Connor, a New Jersey etiquette columnist. "You don't have to give a reason. Just be remorseful and suggest another time. And it doesn't matter if you're married or single -- anyone can be committed."

But that dangling possibility of other commitments could sometimes indicate you're very much uncommitted to the professional endeavors at hand. Take for example, business travelers who find themselves out-of-state with co-workers and clients.

"I work 24-7 and when I'm on the road, dinner is just part of the work day," says Allen Furst, chief financial officer and development chair of Alonzo Mourning Charities. "If you're in a new city, then people are anxious to show you around. And if you're abroad, in say, Europe or Japan, it's very common for things to get done over dinner. I've never avoided business dinners."

SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Furst isn't alone, particularly as companies spring for festive group dinners in elegant settings. The private dining rooms at the Ritz-Carlton, Key Biscayne, for example, are continuously booked with executives gathering for an evening meal, says Camila Chamorro, the hotel's private dining manager.

"When they come here at night, they're more relaxed than at lunch," she says. ``They have wine, and it seems they're willing to spend more to make things nicer for the group. Even men will order a flower arrangement for a table."

In such situations, other commitments are tossed in the back seat, and both guests and hosts should use proper etiquette.

HOST AS GUIDE

The host, says Mary Mitchell, author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Business Etiquette*, is the person who initiates the dinner by extending the invitation. And unless it is a booked dinner party, it's the job of the host to guide the guest toward selecting a restaurant. Sounds tricky, but it's actually very easy if you offer choices, such as, "Would you prefer Italian, because we can go to XYZ, or steak, because ABC is very good also," Mitchell says.

Great. The venue has been chosen, and the meeting is set.

So arrive a bit early and wait at the front -- not the table -- for your dinner companion and relax, because the real decision-making is about to begin: Alcohol or water? Since a good host will insist the guest order first, such a decision can daunt a junior-level employee who is desperately trying to make a good impression.

THE DRINK DILEMMA

"A good host will also provide guidance," says O'Connor. 'And always make a suggestion to a guest, such as `If you like blue martinis, they're good here.' Or 'They have an excellent selection of wines by the glass.' "

If your host forgets this formality, it's fair for the guest to request such guidance by simply asking, "What are you having?" she says.

Assuming everyone abandons roles, "you're never going to look bad by ordering one glass of wine or one cocktail -- assuming it isn't served with a million pink umbrellas," O'Connor says.

The host is also the person who pays. While etiquette columnist O'Connor doesn't encourage junior-level employees to initiate bread-breaking with supersized head-honchos, she says that the rule about the host paying extends across bank account balances and traditional gender roles.

The guest should not only gracefully accept the meal, but also most everything that happens over the course of it. For example, being a guest requires very little interaction with the wait staff, says O'Connor, and guests should restrain themselves from complaining about anything except truly raw or inedible food.

WHO GOES FIRST?

Guests should also let the host take the first sip of wine or cocktails -- water is swigged according to thirst -- and should limit embarrassing menu mispronunciations by pointing and asking the waiter to describe menu entrees that might otherwise be difficult to say.

With all the pomp and circumstance, the most important thing to remember about business dinners is the reason they exist in the first place: to make people feel comfortable about doing business with you. That means even the most embarrassing red wine spill can be easily cleaned up with a good joke, a hearty apology, and a follow-up phone call about the dry-cleaning bill, says O'Connor.

Not incidentally, this provides yet another opening to mention that deal you want to clothes, um, close.

With etiquette issues settled, the business dinner should roll gracefully toward its conclusion. Everyone will know dinner is over when the host places a napkin to the left side of the place setting.