

Formal Table Settings

By Trail End State Historic Site Curator Sharie Mooney Prout; from *Trail End Notes*, May 2010

“Start from the outside and work your way in.”

That’s the advice we received as children in order to politely make our way through a formal meal when we weren’t sure which utensil to use. No doubt the Kendricks thoroughly knew the rules though, what with all of the political dinners and society events they attended from Sheridan to the White House.

But what exactly are the rules? And just what are all those utensils for? It’s really not as complicated as it may seem.



Trail End Table Setting, 2013 (TESHS Collection)

Trail End’s dining room is usually set up for a formal meal, complete with multiple forks, spoons, knives, plates and glasses. In order to explain what they are all for, let’s use the exhibit table as our example. (For now, we’ll ignore service utensils, the very wide variety of bowls, and - our favorite - ice cream forks!)

According to Emily Post, the advice we received is correct: utensils really are placed in the order of use from the outside in. For the meal at our table, salad is set up as the first course, which means that the small, outermost fork on the left is the salad fork. After each course is over, the utensils used for it go away, and we move onto the next utensil for the next course.

The basic rules are that forks go to the left of the plate, and knives (then spoons) go to the right of the plate. But the more formal the meal, the more tableware, and of course, the more rules. This is where it can get tricky. If shellfish is to be served, for example, the oyster fork goes to the right of the spoons. It is the only fork to ever be placed on that side of the plate. We also should not have more than three of the same utensil on the table at once (not counting the

oyster fork in the fork total), so if we are having more than three courses, the silverware is brought in with the fourth course.

As for all the various plates: our salad plate is sitting on a service plate called a "charger." This will be the underplate for all of the courses; when the dinner plate is brought out, it will sit on the charger, as will plates from any subsequent courses. Above the forks is another plate with a small knife: this is the bread and butter plate, with a butter knife. When dessert is served, it will be brought in on yet another dish.

At our table, we are only serving water and one kind of wine, so there are only two glasses. There could be up to five though: water, champagne, red wine, white wine and sherry. These glasses are placed above the knives and spoons with the smaller ones in front.

Lastly, if coffee were being served it would be after the meal, so there are no coffee cups on our table at this point. When served, the cups and saucers will be brought out and placed above and to the right of the spoons.

If we know the basics (or observe the other dinner guests, if nothing else), we can politely make our way through a formal meal with no problem. If you ask us though, the ones who have to be the real experts are the people setting the table to begin with!



© 2020 – Trail End Guilds, Inc. & Trail End State Historic Site

All Rights Reserved

For more information, visit www.trailend.org