

DECOR TOURS
PARIS

PARIS
DISPATCH

No. 5: The Art of French Etiquette

Chers amis!

In this edition we cover some of cultural differences between the U.S. and France. Adopt these local norms while visiting—they can help make your trip much more enjoyable—as we've learned from experience!

You're in France

It might seem obvious but in France, things are done the French way. It's not America, so don't expect it to be in terms of services, space, communication, food, etc.

France, and in particular, Paris, has been so often portrayed—and idealized—that many first-time visitors can find themselves shocked by the ways Parisian behavior and attitudes differ from how they imagined.

In particular, a casual approach to interactions should be set aside while in Paris for a more mannered, discreet behavior. In almost all ways, the French are more measured, with more formalized social rules. Understand these differences to get the most out of your trip.

Three Little Words

You've probably heard this before, but it bears repeating. The social norm in France is simple: You greet people each and every time before saying anything else. This is the case for social interactions, in professional settings, and with those in a service role. *Always begin with a "**Bonjour** madame/monsieur."* This applies for whether you're taking a seat at a café, entering a boutique, or step-

ping into a bakery; greeting the person you're interacting with is a baseline for polite exchange in France. Skipping it can be seen as abrupt or even rude, no matter how friendly your tone is after. Only after you greet the person should you ask your question, place your order, etc.



The magic word in France really is *bonjour* (or *bonsoir* in the evening). And, if you can, throw in a **au revoir** (good-bye) as you leave!

You can probably guess the other two words, **s'il vous plait** (and yes, in French that's more than one word!) and **merci**, because please and thank you are always welcome. Do your best to use at least these few words, even if you are self-conscious. Remember: You're in France. Trying to do things the French way will ultimately be easier, regardless of your accent!

Speak softly

The next best advice we can give: keep your voice down. Parisians value discretion. Loud conversations stand out—and not in a good way. In restaurants, in line, on the Metro, in shops, etc. for most of us the volume should be our “indoor voices” then go even a bit quieter. Loudness can feel jarring and, to some, disrespectful. Conversation in public places, is generally kept to a murmur. Music leaks, speakerphone calls, or loud commentary will mark you instantly as an outsider. This awareness of space and sound applies in restaurants, shops, cafés, public transportation and even elevators.

Keep this mind if you're on your own, with just a single companion, or if we're together as an entire group. That “big energy” that Americans see as cheerful, friendly, and fun, comes across in France as boisterous, bumptious, annoying, and rude.



Public Transportation

Some of these may seem obvious, but for those of you who lead car-centric lives, a few tips to make your trips easier on yourself and your fellow passengers.

1) At a Metro stop, keep to the side when the doors open and let other passengers get off the train before you board yourself. You may see some people trying to force their way on before others have disembarked, but resist the urge to do the same. You won't get on any faster, in fact it slows things down, and you'll annoy everyone.

2) Many Metro cars have a set of fold-down seats near the doors. It is expected that if the train gets crowded, you get on your feet and stand, to provide more room for everyone.

3) We are a large group, so when we board, try to use different sets of doors, or even a different car. Either Deb or I (or perhaps an experienced fellow traveler in our group) will be with the subgroups. We've never lost anyone yet!

If we do get separated—someone misses getting on the car, or getting off at the right stop—get off at the next available stop and stay on the platform. We'll come get you and *tout a bien*, all will be well.

4) As mentioned, keep your volume down. No speaker-phone calls and refrain from speaking too loudly in general when aboard any public transportation.



5) When exiting, especially if the car is crowded, don't wait until the train has stopped to begin making your move toward the doors. Don't shove (obviously) but your fellow passengers will appreciate knowing in advance your intention is to leave.

6) The same principal applies to a bus route, signal your exit to the driver early! And, callback to the "rule of general

politeness", say bonjour to your driver upon entering, then move toward the back to make room. Don't crowd the front if seats are available further down.

7) On escalators and moving walkways, stand to the right and let those moving faster room on the left. The same goes for stairways, if you want to take your time, stay right.



8) While on the Metro, be spacially aware. Know where your bags are, don't let your bulky items impede on anyone's space or progress. There is pickpocketing, especially on the most crowded, touristic lines and stops, and being part of group like ours is a clear indication we're not local! But nothing in your pockets and a hand on your crossbody bag, as well as being aware of other passengers, are all key deterrents. So far, we've never had a to report a case!

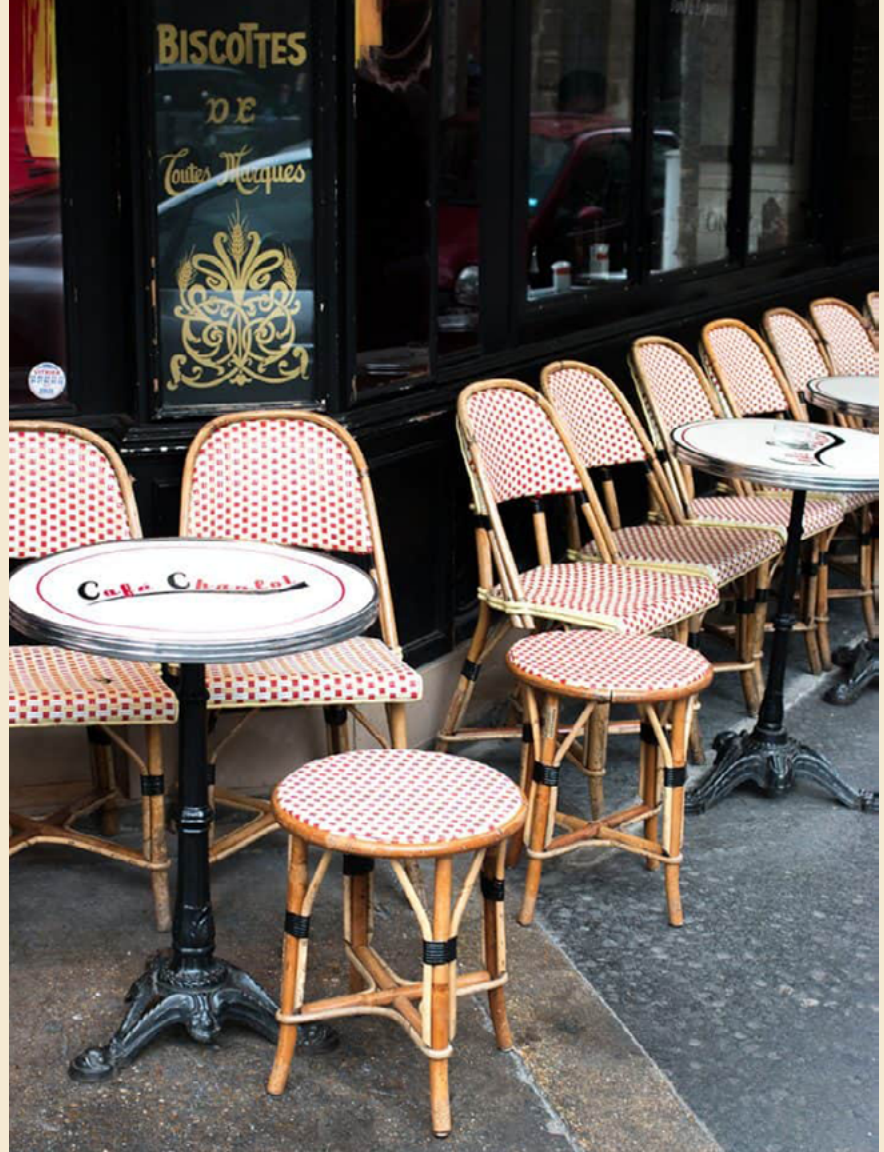
Dining & Restaurants

In Paris dining is an experience, not a quick transaction and Parisian meal culture has its own rhythm and codes.

Let's start outside, with those oh-so-charming café terraces. A table in a Paris café is yours once you order. If you want to sip your coffee, tea, or wine slowly you absolutely can! There's a reason most of the chairs face the street: people-watching is part of the experience. Relax, and don't expect constant check-ins from staff. But keep in mind that it's polite to free up a prime terrace spot during peak hours.

However, before you sit down, whether inside or out, you must first ask about a table. Empty tables do not equal available tables. Even in casual bistros, there's an expected structure: you're greeted and seated (never seat yourself), handed menus at the appropriate time, and only addressed by the server when they're ready—not when you are.

And keep in mind that rhythm: Lunch is typically from 12:00 to 2:00 or 2:30 (some places serve until 3:00). Dinner service begins around 7:30 and peaks



between 8:00 and 9:30. If you want to grab just a coffee at a café, do so before 11:45 AM. After that, all tables are usually reserved for diners, and lingering over your café au lait will get you disapproving looks.

Trying to sit down for a meal outside of those times means you're limited to fast-food (yes they have that in France) or *service continu* locations, which typically tend to be somewhat touristy. Or, for the less touristy options, they will still serve food, but it will be a more limited menu.

We've mentioned this before, but it's worth repeating: If you want to eat a specific time, in a specific area, research your options, make a reservation—and stick to it. If you show up 10-15 minutes late without notifying the restaurant, they will release your table!

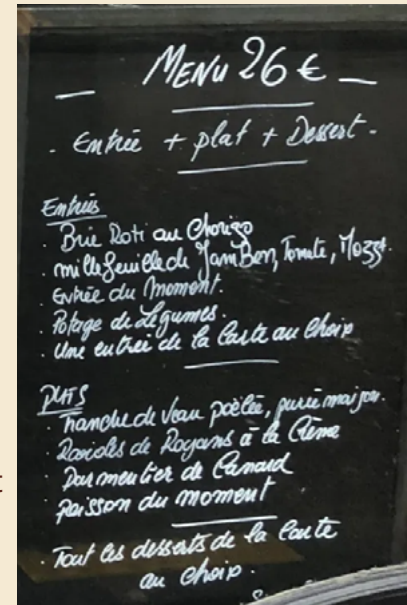
How to dine like the French

The tables in a French restaurant are usually pushed quite close together. Frequently the waiter will have to pull out the table to let one person slide in onto the the banquette. You'll be in close proximity to your neighbors, so elbows in, packages and coats tucked away as much as possible, and use an intimate conversational voice.

Once you have reviewed *la carte* (which is what English-speakers refer to as the menu), you may see or ask if there is a *plat du jour* (dish of the day). Specials, including a three-course *prix fixe*, are usually shown on chalkboard on the walls, or sometime printed as additional pages to the menu. To order *à la carte*, is to choose individual dishes from the menu.

The *prix fixe* option is usually a great option. You get the best the chef has to offer for that day, the freshest products from the market, and generally at a lower cost than ordering *à la carte*.

Finally, let go of your food fears. You will not be able to order like you do at home—can I swap this for that; could I have this without the peas; I'll just have the salad; etc. *Certainement pas*, certainly not! A French chef's menu is not a suggestion, and substitutions are rarely allowed unless it's for an allergy. Embrace this key aspect of French culture and try what is offered.





A few other dining tips

- You often won't find salt and pepper automatically on your table, because the food is already seasoned appropriately by the chef. Try your food first before asking for these. And be prepared for some judgement if you do!
- And, for a country known for its baguettes, there's a lot to understand in regards to bread at a meal!. You often will not receive bread in advance of your meal, but if you do, it is not meant as an appetizer. The bread is used to push your salad onto your fork, or soak up the *délicieuse sauce* your *plat* came bathed in. It's perfectly acceptable to break the bread with your hands, and to place it on the rim of your plate if you don't have a bread plate. Also, you probably won't receive butter with your bread...

"For the first few times I traveled to France, I asked for butter with bread at dinner," said Susan. "I didn't understand the minute sighs, lifted eyebrows, and other indications that what I was asking for was not part of the French code. Finally, one time a waiter explained, "This is not breakfast time, madame."

- Sharing one main during prime meal times, is frowned on. Keep in mind, portions are much smaller than in the U.S.
- Coffee (or tea) will be served to close the meal, after dessert. Never with the dessert. Note: Like butter with your bread after breakfast time, ordering a milky coffee after lunch or dinner was considered a faux pas, but the French seemed to have resigned themselves to this by now!
- There are no "to-go" boxes.
- Do not rearrange chairs, tables, etc. without asking.

- Do not ask for a split check. It's your and your dining companions' responsibility to decide who owes what. If you tell the waiter to charge €XX.XX on one card and €XX.XX on another, that's doable.
- Waiters won't hover, refill your glass unprompted, or rush you out the door. You need to take the initiative—if you want the menu, more water, or the check, politely signal your server by catching their eye.
- Don't be offended if your waiters don't smile or engage with you constantly; their focus is on efficiency, not emotional cheer. Waiters in France are paid a living wage and do not need tips to make up income, as such they handle many more tables than we are used to in the U.S. It's a different approach, yes, but you are in France and it's the French way!

All this said, don't be intimidated, as dining in Paris at a wonderful restaurant is truly a fantastic experience. The notes above are meant to make you aware of the differing expectations between American first-time visitors and French restaurant staff. And, there are many more casual, all-afternoon dining options in Paris than ever, more vegan options, more alternative milk options, more international options, more options in general. It's truly rewarding to explore France through its food!



French Language Basics

Learning the basics of any language can be a great idea, but it will particularly help in France.

The very basics

Oui = Yes (wee)

Non = No (nahn)

Bonjour = hello/good day (bohn-zhoor)

Merci = thank you (mairh-see)

S'il vous plaît = Please (seal voo pleh)

Bonne journée = Have a good day (bun zhoornay)

Bonsoir = good evening (bohn-swahr)

At a restaurant

Vous avez = Do you have... (vooz-ahvay)

un table pour = a table for ... (ahn tablah poor)

J'ai = I have (zhay)

une réservation pour = a reservation for (uhn rezervation poor)

Je suis allergique à = I am allergic to (Juh swees allerjeek ah)

Je voudrais ceci/cette = I would like this/that (Juh voodray sahsee/set)

l'addition = the check (lahdishion)

Une carafe d'eau = a carafe of water (unh carafe dough)

Un verre de = a glass of = (ahn vair duh)

Un menu en anglais = a menu in English (unh meh-noo ahn ahn-glai)



Coffee descriptions

café filtre or café américain = drip coffee

café allongé = espresso with additional water

cafetière = French press

Basic questions

Parlez-vous anglais = Do you speak English (Parlay vousanglay)

Où est = where is (ooh ay)

Qu'est-ce que = what is (quess kah)

Puis-je = may I (pwee juh)

Combien ça coûte? = How much is this? (comb be ahn sah coot)

Peux-tu l'écrire? = Can you write it? (Puh too lucreair)

Pourrais-je essayer? = Could I try (Pooray zhahsayyeah)

At a shop

Je regarde juste = I'm just looking (juh regardah juist)

Vous avez cette taille... = Do you have in size... (voozahvay set tiey...)

Petite, Moyenne, Grande = Small, Medium, Large (puhteat, moyenne, graahnd)

Dans une autre couleur = in another color (dahns uhn ohtrah coolair)

Je vais prendre ça = I'll take this (Juh vay prandrah sah)

J'aimerais = I would like (zhemeray)

Un peu de ça = some of this (uhn pouh duh sah)

Je suis désolé = I am sorry (Juh swee dess olay)

Je ne comprends pas = I don't understand (Juh nuh com-prond pah)

Politeness

Pardon = Sorry (paredohn) or je suis navré (juh swee navray)

Excusez-moi = excuse me (excuze mwah) or veuillez m'excuser (vohljay mexcuezay)

Je vous en prie = You're welcome (Juh voos ahn pree) or de rien (duh ree-en)

Merci pour votre temps/aide = Thank you for your time/help (mairh-see poor voterah tomp/votread)

Reminders

We covered these apps in that last issue, but given the focus on communication and dining, we thought the info made sense to repeat here.

Translation

Everyone needs some help deciphering something—a menu, a label, a sign, etc. And, when you want to very specific about an allergy, request, address confirmation, etc, these apps are life-savers!

Google Translate
[iPhone](#) [Android](#)

DeepL
[iPhone](#) [Android](#)

For dining, we have a couple of pieces of advice:

1) If you are determined to get into a specific restaurant, start your research now! Some hot spots open up reservations only a month in advance, on specific days/times.

2) If you don't know yet where you'd like to try, start re-searching by key words. Do you want a night view of the Eiffel Tower? Sit at a chef's table? Instagramable interiors? Have the best cassoulet in Paris?

Once you have some plans, take advantage of our hotel's concierge service. [Email them](#) your info and requests and ask them to try to score rezzies for you.

3) For apps, we suggest downloading both The Fork and the Michelin Guide. Many Parisian restaurants use The Fork to manage their bookings, vs. Resy or similar apps in the U.S. And the Michelin Guide, although it's a bit clunky to use, can help steer you away from not-great to good/better/best options, based on the neighborhood you're in (or what to go to) and your budget.

The Fork
[iPhone](#) [Android](#)

Michelin Guide
[iPhone](#) [Android](#)





In the next issue of the

PARIS DISPATCH

No. 6: Shopping!

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