



# Table Talk: Matching the Correct Table Setting for Your Service

By Mary Ryan, BA, CDM, CFPP

Setting the table is an often-overlooked activity in many of our dining rooms. If you step back in time and recall events that evoke the warmest memories, many include a meal. I'm not talking about the fancy stuff. I am a child of the '60s and '70s, when the dining room was replaced by the family room, and *Space Food Sticks* and *Tang* were all the rage.

My mother, though a great cook in her own right, spent many a weeknight experimenting on us from her monthly subscription to *Gourmet* magazine. We were the reluctant guinea pigs for her latest concoctions, and our dog Maggie was always a good companion to have near the table. Even on her busiest days juggling full-time work and family, I am reminded of her pre-dinner call to one of us to "set the table." The simple, neatly set table was a visual symbol of the change in our evening activity to family time and dining. All right, the meal was a little adventurous at times, but my love for food and the "magic" created around the table is the reason I continue to work in food service.

We all know that meal service is one of the few spontaneous events in a resident's daily routine. Their first impressions of the dining room – the tables, the neatness of the room – also dramatically affect their total dining experience. Even if you can't afford to have everything "perfectly matched" and it's certainly not necessary, the room, service areas, and table arrangements should always be neat and balanced before you open the doors.

Evaluate the table setting by first surveying the general condition of all the service components used at the table from the ground up. A yearly inventory

of your entire service ware and linens collection will allow you to eliminate and upgrade. I have always stuck to the basic principle that white dishware sets off food the best. It also is the cost-effective way to blend old service stock with new if you need to make replacements. I also choose ware that can take a hit once in a while, so check out products like Corelle. Many patterns look like fine china and are much lighter than stoneware, plus they can really take some punishment in the dish room.

Add color and pattern with linen or paper and table arrangements. If you plan to use tablecloths all the time, consider using a linen service rather than trying to clean and press everything in-house. It is generally more cost-effective and the quality is much better. It also pays to shop around for pricing. I have used linen services that offer a variety of colored napkins, placemats, and tablecloths and have negotiated the price for the same as white cloths. Linen service in health care is a fairly new sales area for many service companies; let them compete for your business. Additionally, make sure your chairs are clean and in good condition and that tables are balanced and stable.

### Determine Your Service Style(s)

Don't be afraid to vary your table setting in the dining room to match the type of service you intend to use. If the room is always set-up formally for every service it is no longer special to the diner. Table settings for the weekdays should be different than for Sunday supper. I would feel uncomfortable if I dined on fancy tablecloths for every meal. Try skipping tablecloths for the noon meal and set the room up a little more formal-

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ly for the evening. Many facilities set their dining room more formally during the day. Whatever the choice, a little variety is good in this area. Match the food to the tableware as well. For example, a formal five-course service set-up for a brunch buffet is inappropriate, especially for a single-entrée option. Sloppy Joes look out of place when served on fancy china. Consider up-scaling their name a bit, perhaps calling them "Messy or Unkempt Josephs." Skip the chips and offer roasted potatoes as a side and you can get by with their new presentation. It takes a little planning and imagination on your part, especially with constrained budgets and a captive audience, but in the long run, it's well worth it.



*Casual table cover uses: diner, bistro, and casual family style service*

Determine your standard cover for casual and formal setup and post it in the service area for referral and training purposes. Here are a few examples:

### Casual Diner Style Cover

The space between the fork and the knife should be at least 15-16" to easily accommodate a dinner plate. Roll-ups: silverware rolled into a napkin is also an appropriate set up for this type of table setting.

Answer these questions – Where would you place the salad fork, soup spoon, or bread plate or water glass? Where are other locations for the napkin?

A general rule of thumb is solid food to the left and liquid to the right. The salad fork is placed on the outside left of the dinner fork. The soup spoon (liquid) is usually placed to the right of the teaspoon. The bread plate (solid) is placed to the left, beside or slightly above the salad fork. The water glass (liquid) is placed to the right, above the knife. The napkin can be placed in the center of the place setting or under or near the fork.

### Formal Dining Cover

A formal table cover has every piece of flatware that will be used for each course. If you only have a single-size fork in your dining room, stagger them to indicate their use. Many restaurants use a modified version of this set up. Note no coffee cup and no condiments. The plate in this case is used as a charger/service plate for the salad and is removed after this course. The appropriate condiment is offered to the guest when the course is presented: beverage, soup, salad, entrée, and dessert. All used cutlery is removed after every course is finished. In reality, the extra cutlery

often gets missed in the course of meal service. In order to reduce the servers' return for extra cutlery, set a dessert spoon and dessert fork above the place setting cutlery. This is a perfectly acceptable method and acts as a visual queue to the server to insure the place setting is complete.

### Get to the Point

You can tell the difference in a dining room when everything is arranged and aligned. In the restaurant business we refer to this as being "on point." Set all tables diagonally (in a diamond pattern) in the room. This table set-up works and dramatically transforms the efficiency of your dining room by providing more visual space for the guest and greater ease for service to the table, especially with walkers and wheelchairs. All tables should be set identically for a uniform appearance. Align cutlery and place settings to mirror each other. Place settings should be set so that guests face each other.

### Service Tips

There are many variations of service style and scores of books written to explain the intricacies of set-up and service. Determine your style by evaluating your staff's capabilities, menu, and dining room/service setup. Whether your method of service is from the left or right hand or side, instruct your staff to *serve and remove plates consistently*. Generally, serve using the right hand to the right side of the guest and clear using the left hand from the left side of the guest. Adopt a standard for your operation and train your staff in that method. Keep in mind women are generally served before men at a table. ■

*Mary Ryan, BA, CDM, CFPP operates Carpenter-Ryan Foodservices in St. Paul, Minn., a culinary consulting group dedicated to bridging the gap between culinary arts and healthcare food service. She is an experienced professional chef.*



*Formal table cover uses: formal, fine dining, and banquet service. This table is set up as a table for four; you will need to increase the setting of condiments for larger tables. Notice how the condiments are set at an angle for all diners at the table to see. Note the low-profile floral arrangement.*

