



## Protocol



*The napkin* can be a Gordian knot of complexity in matters of good table manners. When the successful outcome of a lunch pitch to a new client or that final job interview relies upon two hours of power talk and table prowess, it's often not the tines and tooth-picks that undo us, but the humble white protector. For perfect poise every time, these obligatory do's and don'ts should save you getting egg on your face when it matters.

By Thibault Levy

1. As soon as you sit down, immediately unfold the napkin and place in your lap.
2. Dab the mouth, blot the lips and wipe the cheeks with your napkin.
3. Wipe the mouth each time before you drink; leave no trace on the glass.
4. Keep the napkin at all times on your lap throughout the meal.



5. If your napkin falls to the floor, always ask your server to bring another instead.
6. Place your napkin to the left of your plate on the table should you be excused.
7. Place your napkin loosely on the table at meal's end, again on the left, but never directly on the plate.

1. Wait for your host to open their napkin first, or forget to open it at all.
2. Shake the napkin open like you're waiting for the penny to drop.
3. Scrub your face. It is not a facecloth.
4. Shake the napkin to attract the waiter's attention, make eye contact instead.



5. Blow or wipe the nose and never sneeze into it. It's not a Kleenex.
6. Pick up your napkin if it falls to the floor. Ask the waiter to bring a clean one.
7. Scrub your clothes if you stain them. Go to the dry cleaner.

## Side Dish



*Napkins* at conventional dining tables have been used for about 400 years, but their origins started much earlier, long before diners ever sat at tables to ingest their food.

**Upper Crust:** The first recorded use of napkins was appropriately hands on. Sometime around 500-400BC, Spartans took a slab of dough (*apomagdalie*) cut into small pieces and wiped their hands with it while eating. This later evolved into a custom whereby sliced bread was used to clean the hands.

**Greek Sleek:** The Greeks, statuesque to the last, used alabaster for napkins that were put into a fire afterwards for cleansing. And when they weren't using plaster or stone they used hair belonging to the young servant boys waiting on them.

**Roman Cloth:** Romans refined the practice by switching from bread and stone to fabric. Their napkins were made of coarse unbleached linen and they sometimes used two during the same meal: one to wipe the forehead during warm weather and the other to wipe the gladiatorial lips or cover furniture during a meal. With the rise of the Empire napkins became an expression of conspicuous consumption for Romans, and many were embroidered or interwoven with gold and even monogrammed.

**Anger Romanus:** Where there was luxury, there was larceny. Sometime around 60BC, Catullus - Latin poet of the Republican period who eschewed epic subject matter to write of his own amorous exploits - castigates Asinius Marrucinus for stealing his napkin from an aristocratic banquet: "send back my napkin to me," he implores in the poem *Catullus 12* "which does not move me by its value, but is a remembrance of my comrade. Saetaban napkins from Spain that Fabullus and Veranius sent me as a gift; it is necessary that I love these things."

**Egyptian Chic:** Not content with high-grade linen, the Egyptians warmed and perfumed their napkins, which the women sometimes wore on their heads during dinner.

**Dark Days:** Napkins were dispensed with during the Middle Ages when diners wiped their hands and mouths on whatever was available, be it the back of their hands, clothes, leaves, twigs or their nearest dining companion.

**One for all:** It wasn't until the Renaissance that forks first appeared and diners stopped wiping mouths on the backs of their hands. By the 15th century, collective napkins, which ran around the entire table became a luxury used at royal courts. They make their first appearance in paintings such as *The Last Supper* by Flemish artist Dirk Bouts. By the 16th century, Veronese's *The Wedding Feast at Cana* shows guests seated with individual place settings and napkins.

**Centrefold:** By the 17th century, napkins were spread on tablecloths and the centerpiece of artworks by the likes of French Rococo painter Jean-François de Troy. The fork didn't make its way into all classes of society until the 18th century, by which time napkins had become standard.