

## Which fork do I use? Handling a mealtime job interview

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Many companies now extend interviews to include a meal.

They do so not because they think you are hungry, said Shanna Carter, president of Premiere Image Consultants, but to assess interpersonal skills. "They want to know who you really are and how you interact outside the office setting," Carter said. That means a mealtime interview is "truly an audition," said Dallas Teague Snider, founder of Birmingham-based Make Your Best Impression.

Candidates will be judged on communication skills and etiquette mastery. Hosts will notice details, from whether or not one orders alcohol (a bad idea) to how you treat the wait staff. "Be courteous to those serving you. They are looking to see if you're abrupt, arrogant or kind," said Snider, a corporate etiquette and international protocol consultant.

Companies want to hire good company representatives who will make others comfortable, said Carter, who does regional consulting for companies on professional dining and other etiquette skills. It's a good idea to review an etiquette guide, covering tableware usage, napkin placement and other basics. Remember to say "please" and "thank you."

But mealtime conversation, whether one-on-one or in a crowd, can be the most challenging unknown. "You don't ever want to monopolize your host," said Carter. Always engage every person at the table, especially before being seated. After that, "it is your duty to speak to the person on either side of you," said Snider.

Appropriate conversation follows the host's lead, dictating either a business or social theme. If business is discussed, don't ask technically-detailed questions to demonstrate subject mastery. That might sound pompous instead of smart. Instead, ask for others' insights on industry concerns.

If conversation is social, avoid religion, health or politics. Restaurants, movies or sports are typically safe. "Learn to ask questions about people to get to know them," said Carter. "Ask, 'Where are you from originally?' or 'Tell me about your family.'"

Follow the host's lead in ordering, said Carter. Ask for suggestions, or order something mid-priced, not the cheapest or most expensive menu item. "Stay way from boned chicken, oversize sandwiches and messy pastas," said Carter. "You do not eat before your host. Follow their lead," said Snider. "Don't eat before everyone is served unless you're told to do so." Eating a snack beforehand can help you focus on conversation. "You are there to conduct business, not to eat a meal," said Snider.

Post-meal etiquette counts, too. Never send an e-mail thank you, said Carter. Prepare a handwritten note, stamping/addressing the high-quality stationery envelope ahead, so you can write the enclosure and drop it in the nearest mailbox before heading home.

Carter serves as an etiquette advisor to a state university. The school recently hosted five final, experienced candidates for a top-level search. Afterwards, only one wrote a thank you note. "Guess who got the job?" Carter said. "The one who wrote the note."