

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR by Christine A. Krahl *Fine dining* EXPERIENCE

Great food, great wine and great company are all part of a fun night out. But what happens when your food arrives cold, you're not sure what to tip or you're seated next to the kitchen? Join us for a discussion with Marie Clemens of The Belmont Inne, Dana Insalaco of Vintage Restaurant and Bar, and Joann Vidal of Andrew Moore's Stone Bar and find out!

When celebrating a special occasion, should I let my server know? What do you do for special occasions?

Joann Vidal, Andrew Moore's Stone Bar: It's always nice to acknowledge someone's accomplishments or special day and they usually appreciate the recognition. We either keep it simple and dignified or really ham it up. Always a candle in the dessert, though and at least a scoop of hand-churned ice cream.

Dana Insalaco, Vintage Restaurant and Bar: Absolutely! We let the birthday person choose a dessert and then have our chef write "Happy Birthday" with the person's name in chocolate on their dessert plate. If you're here on a Wednesday night, we have live music so we ask the band to sing to you. But usually my "present" to the birthday person is to not sing!

What is an appropriate tip these days and on what factors should the tip be based?

JV: Most of us would agree that a 20% tip is most appropriate for expected service, attention to detail, and knowledge of food and wine.

Marie Clemens, The Belmont Inne: Factors on which a tip should be based include the server's demeanor, i.e., if the server is "having a bad day," that should not be evident to the customer; the timeliness of service received; the willingness to address any special requests a patron may have and the patron's overall dining experience.

If my food arrives lukewarm or my steak has not been cooked as requested, what is the best way to handle this? What should a patron never do in this situation?

JV: Let your server know as soon as possible. Be patient and respectful and never make a scene about it. It's not such a big problem and is often compensated in some way.

DI: Tell your server right away so we can fix the problem. NEVER just eat it and tell us at the end or not say anything at all. No matter what the case may be, we can rectify any problem as long as it's brought to our attention. We view any criticism as constructive; after all, it is

our job to ensure every guest has a truly enjoyable dining experience from start to finish.

What is the biggest misconception people have about a server's job?

JV: That we are uneducated or we must have financial problems in order to choose this line of work. Most of us have higher degrees or are avid readers but got bit by the food service bug. It's really fun!

MC: That it is easy, when many times it is not. On a busy Friday or Saturday night, a server could be handling six or more tables at one time and he/she needs to do their best to ensure that all of their tables have the proper food and beverages with minimal wait times, and that their orders are prepared to their liking.

DI: That our job is easy or that we are uneducated. But most importantly, that we hate our jobs. I love what I do and where I do it; I feel very lucky to call some of our guests friends and to work with lots of my best friends.

What is the most unusual request you've ever received? Did you honor it?

DI: Well, once we were asked if we could "do something" about the rain, but unfortunately I don't control the weather! However, we do our best to honor any other special requests. For example, allergies, substitutions, or special food requests.

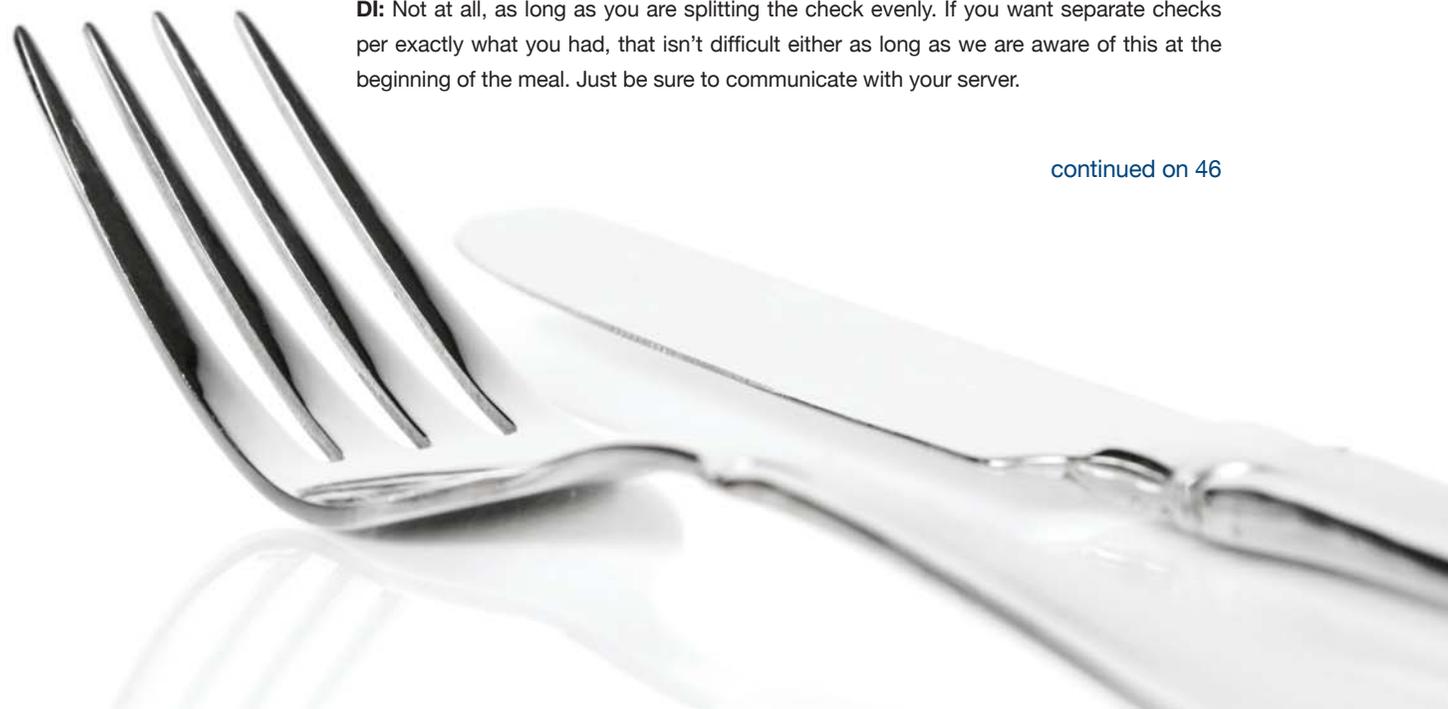
JV: Dessert in between courses—and of course!

When dining out with friends, do you mind if we all hand over our credit cards and ask that our bill be split amongst them?

MC: If a larger dinner party is splitting the bill by couple, servers appreciate being aware of that up-front, so that they can maintain separate tabs from the beginning of the service. This makes it easier on the part of the server, and also enables them to provide patrons with their individual checks in a timelier manner. However, if the party is simply splitting the check "down the middle," it really does not matter, as it is no additional work on the part of the server.

DI: Not at all, as long as you are splitting the check evenly. If you want separate checks per exactly what you had, that isn't difficult either as long as we are aware of this at the beginning of the meal. Just be sure to communicate with your server.

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How do you handle people talking on their phones or texting while you're trying to serve them?

JV: It's understandable unless in the middle of your presentation they pick up a call. People don't realize that timing is everything to a server. So, please at least wait until the specials are presented.

MC: Some restaurants have instituted policies (written on their menus) asking that cell phones not be utilized in the dining room. Personally, I do not feel it is inappropriate to answer the cell phone if a call is received, as it could be an emergency. However, if the call lasts more than just a few seconds, I believe that patrons should excuse themselves from the table and complete their call in a foyer or outside the building, to avoid disturbing their guests and other patrons in the restaurant.

DI: As long as you put it down long enough to order, I don't care if you talk on it the whole time. It's only rude to the people you are dining with.

How does seating work, exactly? If I don't like where I'm seated, is it rude to request a table in a different location in the dining room?

JV: As we take reservations, we allot a two-hour timeframe for each table and sometimes less. Empty tables are reserved and depending on when you walk in there may or may not be a little bit of wiggle room to shuffle the tables to fit your change of request but always ask. Be open minded; you'll enjoy yourself much more.

MC: Generally when planning seating, the first step is to review if any reservations have requested a special table or a window seat. Once those requests have been honored, the next step is to identify which of the "better tables" (i.e., near window, in a corner, etc.) are still available, and assign those to reservations. The last remaining tables, which are typically in the more highly traveled areas of the dining room, are then kept available for last-minute reservations or walk-in customers.

DI: We do try to not overload one server's section but we all work as a team at Vintage so sometimes this could happen. It's definitely not rude to ask to move, as long as the table you are requesting isn't already reserved. We try to do all we can to ensure you are comfortable from the very start.

If there were one thing you'd want patrons to know about dining at your restaurant, what would that be?

JV: It's important to support the little guy!

MC: If there is one thing I would want patrons to know, it is that if they join us at The Belmont Inne they will enjoy an exceptional, all-inclusive meal (salad, starch and vegetable included) at a reasonable price.

DI: We are like a big family here at Vintage and it shows! We have very little staff turnover so many of us have worked together for years. Also, we have such amazing regular guests that the overall feel of the restaurant is very warm and inviting. 🍷