



Down with Roll-Ups — Set the Table!

By David Rothschild

If the headline sounds cranky, it's because when it comes to rolled silverware vs. table setting, I can be downright cantankerous. No one is ever going to convince me that tables with silverware roll-ups tossed on them are as attractive as a properly set table. Ain't gonna happen! First impressions really are important. A guest makes a judgment about a restaurant within the first few seconds of entering. Subconsciously, he's looking for balance in the room because symmetry is pleasing to the eye.

Care should go into setting a table. Think of the diners as guests in your home. Don't they deserve your best efforts? When tables are set carelessly, a guest is concerned, and rightly so, about what kind of effort is going into the preparation of his meal. All the tables should be aligned in rows. Every nuance of the tabletop should be well thought out and designed to complement the décor. A Mexican-themed restaurant screams for colorful, contemporary dinnerware, casual glassware, and brightly colored napkins and placemats. Starched table-

cloths and subtle, clean, sophisticated tablewares say elegant dining.

The first step in setting the table is to make sure all of the tables and chairs are steady and in good repair. When a guest sits down at a table that is rocking and rolling, it makes him feel out of kilter. Not a good start to his dining experience. We recommend keeping a supply of Wobble Wedges on hand! Chairs at each table should be placed so that a definite seat number one is apparent to all service personnel (to facilitate food delivery without auctioning). Seats and booth benches need to be clear of crumbs and other debris. During table turns, you also need to be sure there's no litter under the tables. All guests should be offered the same dining experience.

At a table properly set for an even number of guests, all chairs should be lined up directly across from one another. When you stand behind a chair, you should see a setting right across from you. On a round table with an odd number of guests, there should be an even amount of space between chairs. When you stand behind a chair

in this instance, you'll see an empty space across from you (as one of my 16-year-old students once astutely observed).

Using the same pivot point that was used to assign seat numbers, all centerpiece objects should be uniformly set on each table throughout the restaurant. Casino restaurant tabletops tend to be really cluttered. Along with the requisite salt, pepper and sugar (and sometimes a candle or floral arrangement), they often include table numbers, Keno paraphernalia and advertising table tents. A diagram should be provided in each side station indicating the placement for all of these items.

Table cleaning and maintenance duties are also part of proper table setting. Remember: The table needs to be cleaned under — not just around — all those objects I mentioned above. All salt and peppershakers need to be filled to capacity (one of my pet peeves!) and clean to the touch. Nothing says table neglect like fingerprints, food drips and spills on shakers, table tents and other promotional items.

Some table setting vocabulary:

A cover has two meanings, either an individual guest (as in, "I had 20 covers in my station last night") or an area directly in front of a guest of approximately 18-24 inches, which encompasses a complete setting.

Set line is an imaginary line (in some cases table designs have an actual set line), about one inch from the edge of the table. Nothing should be set below this line so guests don't inadvertently knock silverware off of the table.

The center of the cover is lined up with the center of the chair. A napkin usually fills it. In the simplest of settings, the flat-fold napkin is topped with a fork, knife and spoon. In the next-tier restaurant, a simple setting might include an attractively folded napkin in the center of the setting. In a very upscale setting, the center of the cover is filled with a show plate.

Tables are set for right-handed guests because nine out of 10 diners are right-handed. Glassware is set to the right of the setting, with the water glass directly above the knife blade. The knife is placed to the right of the setting to accommodate a right-handed diner. The cutting edge of the knife blade always faces to the left, toward the forks. Forks are set to the left, with the tines facing up. If a bread and butter plate is used — and upscale restaurants should use one — it's placed either to the left of the forks or above them. Silverware and glassware must be polished, free of water spots, before the table is set.

The argument for silverware rollups is that it is a quicker and easier way to set and reset tables. I disagree. It's just as easy to set a table as it is to sit and roll silverware. As for speed, Las Vegas casino restaurants do thousands of covers each meal

— period — and they've devised ways to do simple, fast table setting. It's unlikely your service teams are doing a higher volume than that.

Aside from the obvious advantage of a better-looking table top with settings vs. roll-ups, there are several others. Servers and bussers tend to stay on the floor, not in the side station. With more people on the floor, guests are getting better service. Someone is always available for requests and to answer questions.

Yes, I've heard the argument that people don't like having their silverware set on a bare tabletop. But where do you think it ends up when they take it out of the roll-up? Maybe it's time for us to consider going back to placemats as part of the table setting. One company even produces a product called Manners-Menders, molded plastic holders that give diners a place to rest their utensils while providing a place for you to advertise your restaurant, specials or events.

At the very least, we need to be sure our tables are always impeccably clean and sanitized. Restaurants look best when they are fully set. A restaurant "shows" best when it is set all of the time — even when closed. Guests look into your restaurants during down times and often make dinner decisions based on how the room looks. Guests will notice the difference, and your bottom line will reflect it. **NAC**

David Rothschild is co-owner of EATiQuette, a Phoenix-based waitstaff training company. He can be reached at (602) 569-2051 or David@EATiQuette.com. You can read David's previous Native American Casino articles on EATiQuette.com by using the "articles" link on the home page.



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