

Ticket



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TICKET

A Guidebook

for

the Table

MORTARBOARD PRODUCTIONS
CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA

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*For Georgia and Trevor
and
In memory of my sister Carroll*

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The predictability of manners (if *this* is happening, we must all do *that*) makes us interlock with each other, all act in concert. We connect, in addition, with events, dates, shared emotions, kinship and group ties, the life cycle, the world in general. Conventions, as the word suggests, come together.

—Margaret Visser, *The Ritual of Dinner*

Preface

Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is a progressive university town called “the southern part of heaven.” Thank heaven it is the town that I call home. Growing up in this academic community, I took for granted the genteel southern manners and mores that were integral to the culture. Mine was a world of traditions: courtesy was next to godliness, family was supreme, and the seated evening meal was a sacred ritual that anchored each day. As children, my two younger sisters and I took turns setting the table where no books or toys were allowed during dinner, and certainly no bobbing up and down for second helpings or to answer phone calls. We were taught to sit up straight, put our napkins on our laps, use our utensils properly, ask that salt and pepper be passed to us rather than lunge across the table, and in all things to say “please” and “thank you.” We engaged in normal, playful conversation with adults and responded “Yes, sir” and “Yes, ma’am.” Instead of bolting from the table at the end of dinner we asked, “May I be excused, please?” and patiently waited for a response. The etiquette of dining was the structural underpinning for the spontaneity of our lively communions. And lively they were!

My father, Kay Kyser, was a big band leader and entertainer in the 1930s and 1940s well-known for his NBC radio and TV shows, “The Kollege of Musical Knowledge,” his “Ol’ Professor” persona, and wacky films. By the time my sister Carroll and I were in kindergarten, he was completely retired from public life and had moved us out of the limelight into his welcoming home state and the

village of Chapel Hill, population 9,000. My father's University of North Carolina education, devotion to family, and Baptist background defined his values. And as you might expect, he was from a long line of teachers, university professors, and professionals. With old-school notions of child rearing, he was at once a strict taskmaster and iconoclast, and one of the funniest people you would ever meet—confusing characteristics in a middle-aged man who dressed in coat and tie and insisted on formalities such as standing up when an adult came into the room and addressing parents of friends as “Mr. and Mrs.” He politely corrected fans or acquaintances who were too familiar: “You may call me Mr. Kyser.”

Behind closed doors “Mr. Kyser” was not always formal, and the dinner table became his stage. The occasional swinging of his fork in the air while talking at table was a deliberate act to provoke giggles from us, the peanut gallery, and to tease my mother. “Kay, stop it! You are setting a bad example for the girls!” Tucking the linen napkin into the neck of his shirt was rebellion, too: he knew better, but he could control his mischievousness only so long. With deadpan delivery and the comedic timing of a true showman, he sat quietly listening to the all-female dinner chatter, waiting for the right moment to interrupt with jokes, puns, and irreverent but never vulgar stories as well as serious ones that taught values dear to his heart. He wove seamlessly into our conversations corrections of grammar, comportment, and misguided thinking.

My mother was Georgia Carroll, the first high-fashion supermodel discovered by famous New York agency owner John Robert Powers. He named her “The Most Beautiful Woman in the World.” Instantly successful, she graced the covers of *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, to name only a few, and was the face of the American Red Cross during the Second World War. After a brief acting career at Warner Brothers and MGM in Hollywood, she met my father when they worked together on the War Bond Tours and USO shows for the troops.

During one performance at a base camp in the California desert (a show that luckily was captured on film for us to see today), my father excitedly announced to thousands of eagerly awaiting soldiers, "And n-o-w, here is gorgeous Georgia Carroll!" Deafening applause, wild cheering, and wolf whistles erupted as she walked on stage dressed in a tight sweater and flirty short skirt to pick the winning raffle number from a fishbowl filled with ticket stubs. Years later my father loved to say with a suppressed smile and cheeky twinkle in his baby-blue eyes that when he took one look at her in that outfit, he thought, "Now there's a girl who can cook." She became lead singer for his orchestra, and although fourteen years his junior, she became his leading lady in life: they married in 1944. Despite my father's facetious remark, Mother *did* become an accomplished cook and true gourmet. I used to tease that her taste buds were worthy of the Smithsonian!

At our house we had what southerners called "help," including someone who cleaned up after dinner. But no hired help, friends, or relatives could ever cook to my mother's satisfaction. She insisted on doing her own shopping and cooked everything herself. And no wonder: she had studied at Le Cordon Bleu Institute in New York City. At home in Chapel Hill our everyday menus were inspired by French cuisine and, occasionally, southern specialties to please my father. My sisters and I were thrilled when Mother baked our stately layered birthday cakes and decorated them with not only our names but also elaborately detailed flowers trailing from baskets or a trellis overflowing with Confederate jasmine made entirely of icing. With much attention paid to the preparation of food, presentation and consumption required equal respect. Reverence for the table and a love for all things associated with dining were thus ingrained and taken seriously.

Mother had a wonderful sense of humor and, like my father, told stories with a purpose. Two of her memorable stories were about manners. In the first, a sophisticated

New York hostess presiding over a formal dinner party noticed that a guest cutting his meat had lost control of his knife, which skidded across the plate and scattered peas onto the table in front of him. Without missing a beat, the hostess took her knife and pretended to make the same mistake, sending peas onto the table around her plate. Graciousness is saving face for others.

The other story was about a mother who explained to her daughter that a very nice woman called Mrs. Jones would be coming to tea. "Now, darling, I want to warn you ahead of time that Mrs. Jones has a very large, unusual nose." She took the child's hands in hers and, looking into the child's eyes, then earnestly and painstakingly continued, "Please, please don't stare at her nose." The child nodded in agreement, "Yes, Mother."

Mrs. Jones arrived, exchanged greetings with the mother and daughter, and was ushered into the sitting room where they chatted until it was time for tea. The mother moved the party to the tea table, which was beautifully arranged with a plate of cucumber sandwiches and another plate filled with scones and small individual bowls of jam and heavy clotted cream. Holding the silver teapot in her right hand and the fine bone china teacup and saucer in her left, the mother poured the tea oh-so-correctly, ceremoniously. She then placed the teapot on the silver tray and, still holding the cup and saucer as one is required to do, she turned to Mrs. Jones and asked, "May I offer you cream or sugar in your nose?"

I can still see my beautiful mother with her perfect nose and toothpaste-ad-pretty smile curled up coyly on the chintz-covered sofa in our sunny family room reciting this story to a small audience—my sisters and me and a few girlfriends from the neighborhood. She ended it with her breathy-silent laugh but offered no moral to the story, at least not that I can remember. Was this tea fable to be read as a catty put-down, or was it to be given a more kindly interpretation, an admonition that when we concentrate

too hard on *not* taking the wrong step, that is precisely when we fall down?

Like my father, I am a devoted North Carolinian and call myself a native. I now speak, think, write about the South with a capital *S*. While my ancestry is southern on both sides, I am a confusing hodgepodge of “southern” influences. I was born in southern California—Hollywood, to be exact. After my family moved back east and settled in Chapel Hill for the school year, we returned to Beverly Hills for the entire summer. This was partly to escape the heat of North Carolina before air-conditioning, to be with friends and family who had relocated to California. “It was a weaning away time,” as Mother described it years later, a gradual good-bye to the glamorous life. When I turned thirteen California was no longer the focus and the family summered in Europe. The crossings—and there were many over the years—were on the last of the grand ocean liners including the S.S. *France*, whose first-class Chambord dining room was called the greatest restaurant in the world. As the name suggests (Chambord is the sixteenth-century French Renaissance chateau built by King François I), the sumptuous food and ceremonious service were fit for a king and his court. In the evenings we dressed formally to dine on *la grande cuisine* in the classical nineteenth-century tradition of Carême (1784–1833) and Escoffier (1847–1935), modernized very little for gourmets of the 1960s. The *maître d’hôtel principal* ruled the Chambord dining room. His highly trained assistant *mâtres* and captains in formal attire politely explained the complex menu to guests and guided our orders while keeping an eye on the servers lower in the hierarchy: the *commis* who delivered food from the kitchen and the *garçons* who served with elegance and style. My “Irish twin” younger sister, Carroll, ordered with abandon: lobster, quenelles, vichyssoise, paté, *mille-feuilles* (Napoleons), Gateau Saint-Honoré (cream puff cake), you name it. Nothing was too exotic for Carroll. The *France* provided

otherworldly dining experiences that I shall never forget, though I regret that much of the *cuisine classique* was lost on me. With adolescent rigidity I ordered grapefruit, steak, and ice cream almost every night—hardly *haute*!

Mother planned our life-altering travel. While in her early 30s with three small children at home, she enrolled in the University of North Carolina to pursue a bachelor's degree. "Education" reinforcing her college course work conveniently justified our long summers in Europe. Everything she studied rubbed off on us one way or another. And it was not just the immersion in history, art, and architecture: simply living the European experience was formative. These were my teenage years, after all—a time for observing and learning through osmosis what to do when, particularly at the table, where Europeans take proper manners seriously and are quick to judge when manners are lacking. It was in this period, and when I studied in the south of France during college, that I adopted the Continental style of holding cutlery.

At a simple restaurant in the French countryside, I watched a boy my age peel an orange with surgical precision using his fork and knife, never touching the fruit with his hands. After sleeping a night in rented rooms in an Austrian working class high-rise our family of five crowded onto wooden benches at a small kitchen table for breakfast. Our hosts spoke no English, and we spoke not one word of German. Dressed in trousers held up by suspenders and a sleeveless undershirt, the man of the house ate in silence while my sisters and I practiced our best table manners over bowls of oatmeal and slabs of hard bread, and my father entertained the group with pantomimes. Dining at the Danieli in Venice, if I asked for ketchup, or if my father demanded ice or, much worse, iced tea, or my sisters and I laughed too loudly—mostly at my father's vivid imitations amid recitations of the day's funny events—Mother scolded, "Don't be the Ugly American!" This was shorthand for "Blend in! Don't be loud." We were guests in a foreign country; being loud

and demanding American creature comforts, especially while dining, is rude.

Comportment and consideration that put others at ease were my mother's concern. My father certainly was in agreement with her, yet his sights were set on the big picture: he saw to it that his all-female brood felt confident and at ease at any table, high or low. He of all people knew the value of adaptability. Well-traveled in the United States and abroad, my parents knew from experience that international travel—especially diverse dining experiences that bring one face-to-face with cultural differences—teaches respect for customs and heightens sensitivity to context. They insisted on our learning etiquette, including table manners, not so much for appearance's sake but because knowing *what* to do *when* is liberating: we can relate to people, all kinds of people, directly without being distracted by mechanics.

While writing this preface and recalling how I learned table manners, I asked myself what relevance my story, and indeed table manners, have today? I'll answer with the aid of a quote I found in a magazine in the waiting room of my dentist's office, words by the wine critic and cookbook author Matt Kramer that inspired an "aha moment." Kramer laments the loss of social ritual and gets directly to the heart of the matter: "In our collective preference for casual we lose a bit of ceremony, of ritual and, not least, a kind of pause for a daily form of beauty." Daily beauty is the heart of the matter. The table and the manners we bring to it transform the fulfillment of a biological need into a social if not an aesthetic experience that, with just a little forethought and effort, feeds body and soul.

Young readers, you are living in a fast-paced, multicultural world that differs in many ways from the world of my generation; yet you will be surprised how little the fundamentals of courtesy have changed. They are universal, especially when it comes to the ritual of dinner.

Table manners and thoughtful behaviors associated with dining are timeless and exceedingly important for a variety of interpersonal and professional reasons. You may be pleasantly surprised to discover the ease with which you can learn the rules of the table and cultivate the self-confidence that comes with being a skilled dinner partner. Happy reading and *bon appétit, buon appetito!*

For more information about "Ticket: A Guidebook for the Table,"
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