

Better Late Than Never?

Written by L.A. Plume
Tuesday, 17 March 2009 07:24

Dear Ms. Plume,

I had a dinner party and one couple never did show up or even call to say they weren't coming. We waited for them, tried to call and didn't get an answer, and finally ate without them, but there was a glaring empty spot at the table.



When one of the other guests asked them about it the next day, they replied that something more interesting had come up. Would it be terribly rude of me to invite them again and just not be home when they arrive?

Miffed

Dear Miffed,

Of course it would be very rude to do that, but I think it's a brilliant idea and wish I had thought of it first.

L.A.P.

We are self-conditioned to be on time people, or late people. There is, however, the concept of "fashionably late," which actually means no more than fifteen minutes for a dinner party. There are times that anyone of us could be late – okay, maybe not if you have been an airline pilot. We underestimate the time it takes to get ready, we change our clothes, we answer the phone on our way out the door, we don't know what the traffic will be. Even if our *modus operandi* is to be the early bird, sometimes we will be late. Upping the ante on the *de rigueur* hostess gift is one small way to compensate for this.

As Mr. X, a most fashionable and gracious host, says, "It's a matter of giving importance to somebody inviting you to their home, preparing a meal, taking care of you, and making sure you are comfortable. This is not a restaurant business, it's a personal gift, so be gracious and accept the kindness of the gift by just being there... on time! If you don't want to go, then find an excuse, but once you have accepted it's a matter of courtesy to arrive neither early, nor late, but on time. If you arrive late and dinner is spoiled, then you deserve all the indigestion you get."

Emily Post also had little tolerance for latecomers. In the 1945 edition of *Etiquette* she wrote: "It is true that lateness is on occasion tolerated in those whose compensating assets of talent or charm are sufficiently great." By 1955 she had changed her tune a bit and said: "The point to make is that the habit of lateness is not the result of the inability of the habitually tardy to measure time (as their friends try to believe), but the result of a coldly calculated intention of a selfish woman (rarely a man) to make an entrance wherever she goes exactly as a star of the theatre makes her entrance on the stage." Obviously this was written before the Equal Rights Amendment passed and men were more in touch with their feminine sides.

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One of my favorite “late” stories that had a happy ending occurred a few summers ago. The Duchess was having a dinner party one fine evening in London and a certain natty gentleman from Notting Hill had been invited. Since good manners and late dinners prevail in the UK, we patiently awaited his arrival whilst sipping martinis and cosmopolitans (The Duchess' drink of choice). An hour or so later the doorbell rang; I went to the door and asked in a very dulcet tone who might be there. Mr. Notting Hill said it was he – without opening the door I sweetly reminded him he was an hour late for dinner and asked if he had a password. He said no, but he did have two chilled bottles of Veuve-Clicquot in his hands. He was instantly forgiven and the door was flung open so quickly that it nearly missed knocking him over.

Moral of the story? If you're going to be more than fashionably late, bring exceptional champagne, preferably with a box of elegant chocolates; and if you're going to be really, really late add some lovely jewelry to the gift bag. Of course, if you're going to be that late you might as well spend your money to go to someplace like Marrakech for the weekend, instead, because you will have missed dinner anyway.

Always keep a good box of chocolates on hand for emergencies. If you're going to be late, that isn't what you want people to remember – better that they remember the chocolates.