

Seating Matters

Written by L.A. Plume
Tuesday, 28 April 2009 04:59

Dear Ms. Plume,

My husband and I are informal entertainers, usually inviting close friends and family for impromptu or seasonal events.



We've decided that we want to entertain more friends, and so invited a couple of recent acquaintance to a Saturday night dinner.

I followed my usual practice, prepared a simple menu and a rather country style table setting for four at our square drop leaf table with a floral brocade table cloth, plain stemware, white china, and a small vase of daffodils on the table. I hadn't given any thought to seating because the we have our "usual" seats at the dinner table – my husband and I sit on one side and guests on the opposite or one end. (The drop leaf blocks one end of the table.)

Our new friends were helpfully carrying serving dishes to the table, when I was asked the question to which I didn't know the answer: "Are we sitting American style or European style?"

We ended up sitting diagonally across from our spouses, and that worked fine. We had a thoroughly enjoyable dinner and an evening of interesting conversation.

Then I began to wonder about the entire subject of seating. Does a seating pattern at the dinner table and perhaps even in the living room after dinner, stimulate conversation? What are the reasons for seating decisions and what is affected by seating? What is American style? What is European style?

I'd appreciate any light you can shed on this subject.

Sincerely,
Susan

Dear Susan,

I have hosted over a thousand dinner parties, both here and abroad. Neither I, nor anyone I know, have ever heard of an American vs. European style of seating. There is an American vs. European style of eating, and American vs. European seating time on cruise ships. It was rather presumptuous of your guest to ask that question anyway; all she had to do was wait to see where and how you seated her. Luckily for her, she did not come to dinner at my house because I might have told her that I prefer my guests to sit with their backs to the table. When she returns the invitation, you can ask her, when seated, which method she chose and why. Seating placement is of the utmost importance at a dinner party. You can't go far wrong with only four people but you should be seated across from your guests, not at right angles to them if you only use three sides of your table. It doesn't much matter at an informal dinner if you are seated next to, or across from, your husband, but if you are seated next to your husband, the other gentleman should be across from you; in other words, remember the old adage of boy, girl, boy, girl, whenever possible.

If it is a more formal dinner, the host and hostess sit at opposite ends of the table with the "lady of honor" at the right of the host, and the "gentleman of honor" to the right of the hostess; otherwise the host sits at the head of the table with the "lady of honor" at his right and the "gentleman of honor" at the opposite end of the table with the hostess on his left. How this

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works out, obviously, depends on whether or not there is an even or odd number of people at each side. The guests "of honor" are the most distinguished or oldest gentleman and lady, those with a military or government rank, or can even be someone who is a new guest to your home. If there is no understandable hierarchy, the next best thing to do is to seat your guests, boy, girl, next to someone they don't know that well but with whom you feel they will have something in common.

Dinner conversation should be amusing, provocative, stimulating, and above all, interesting to everyone at the table. The point of having people to dinner is to have an enjoyable evening. If you know certain couples tend to stick together, use place cards. If place cards seem too formal, you can make a little diagram on the palm of your hand and seat them as they come to the table. If you choose the latter method, make sure you don't need reading glasses if you don't normally wear them, because squinting at the palm of your hand is not very good form. Also, left-handed people prefer to be seated with a free space to their left.

If you are very brave, and I can assure you this is quite good fun, seat people next to each other who have opposing viewpoints and watch the fur fly as the wine flows. If you attempt this, it would best to use your everyday china and stemware.

Enjoy, and bon appetit!

L.A.Plume