

Chewing With Your Mouth Open

Sharing is good. Food is good. But sharing the sights and sounds of food in your mouth as you chew isn't good. Smacking your lips as you open and close your jaws makes lots of noise. It's a spectacle. Partially chewed food falls from your open mouth or is catapulted across the table. People are grossed out. So why do they even care?

Well, since you asked: how you chew is a part of *etiquette*, the customary code of polite behavior. Nine thousand years ago, prehistoric men had rules (manners) to determine who dipped their wooden spoons into the common cooking pot to eat first. By the way, the men were first.

Two thousand years ago, Greek and Roman manners dictated that people eat with their fingers while reclining on a couch and propped up on one arm. And today, certain indigenous peoples of the Arctic consider it proper to eat from a common cooking pot with their hands, men first, then women and children.

American table manners had their beginnings in the European courts around 1100 A.D. The rules were to make eating a more pleasant and orderly experience. People were asked not to speak with their mouths full, not to pick their teeth with their knives, or to grab food.

As time went by, diners learned not to lick their fingers, smack their lips, snort, or put their faces in their food. Forks were used for the first time during the Renaissance. People began eating from plates, and bones weren't to be thrown on the floor anymore for the animals to eat. Everyone had his own cup, too.

In America these days, chewing with your mouth open is the great faux pas of table manners. The grande dame of manners, Emily Post, has a list of the top ten bad table manners. Here they are summarized in order from bad to worse. The fewer of these behaviors you show off at the table, the more impressed those with whom you eat will be.

- #10 Leaving the table without saying, "excuse me."
- #9 Doing a "boardinghouse" reach instead of asking for what you want to be passed to you.
- #8 Slouching over your place setting or leaning on your elbows while eating.
- #7 Cutting up all your food at once.
- #6 Drinking while still chewing food—unless you're choking, of course.
- #5 Failing to put your napkin on your lap or use it at all.

- #4 Picking your teeth at the table or, even worse, flossing.
- #3 Holding eating utensils like a shovel.
- #2 Slurping, smacking, blowing your nose, or making any other unpleasant noises while seated at the table.
- #1 Chewing food with your mouth open or talking with food in your mouth.

Table manners, of course, vary from place-to-place and culture-to-culture. What's okay in America won't pass muster in Rangoon, or the other way around. And what's acceptable one day may not be the next because manners are always changing to meet society's needs. As things stand now, here are some general pointers to chew on.

Table-related Dos and Don'ts

- Avoid Emily's top ten bad manners at all cost.
- When you're not sure what to do, watch other people and follow their lead.
- Don't bite off more than you can chew, literally and figuratively.
- Set aside time to eat. It's impossible to have good manners when you're in a rush.

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