

Place Setting Confusion

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Q: I attended a wedding reception and the person next to me used my bread plate. Is there a way to avoid this mix-up and what can I do if it happens again?

A: Confusion about the order of the place setting is a common occurrence. There is no hard rule in which to avoid a tabletop turf war except to use your bread plate before the person seated next to you.

If the person to your left places their roll on your bread plate the last thing you want to do is make them feel awkward for their error. One remedy is to claim the bread plate on your right, just as the person who made the original blunder did, and hope the whole table plays along. Winston Churchill performed a similar act of mercy when a foreign dignitary unwittingly drank from a finger bowl – rather than embarrass his guest Mr. Churchill picked up his finger bowl and began to drink too.

By the time you notice the faux pas the person on your other side may already be using their bread plate. In this instance you can gently whisper to the interloper, “I may be mistaken, but isn’t this plate mine?” When dining at a restaurant the problem is easily solved by asking the server for another plate.

Once you take your place at the table, if you’re one of the many people who have difficulty remembering the “left to right” order of items in the place setting, all you need to do is recall these famous initials: “B.M.W.” which also stands for “bread, meal, water.”

When dining with other guests, however, the most important consideration is to make everyone feel comfortable. It isn’t necessary to get all the details right.