



We've all faced unfamiliar or hard-to-eat foods, or wondered whether the way we eat a particular food at home "isn't done" in public. What you do depends on the situation. With friends, don't be embarrassed to say, "I've never eaten escargot before. Please show me how." If you're at a formal function or among strangers, just delay eating until you can take a cue from your host or from other diners. Reviewing the guidelines below will keep you from wondering how to serve or how to eat "tricky" foods.

Artichokes

Artichoke leaves are always eaten with the fingers. Pluck off a leaf on the outside, dip its meaty base into the melted butter or sauce provided, then place it between your front teeth and pull forward. The idea is to use your teeth to scrape the meat off the leaf. Continue leaf by leaf, placing discarded leaves on the edge of your plate (or on a plate provided for the purpose), until you've reached the artichokes thistlelike choke or the leaves are too small or meatless. Use your knife at a 45 degree angle to remove the remaining leaves from the choke, exposing the artichoke heart below. The cut the heart into bite-size pieces and eat it with a fork, dipping each forkful into the sauce.

Asian Dishes

Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, and Korean cuisines are well established in America. While there's no real need to follow the eating traditions from each country, it doesn't hurt to know a bit about them. For instance, at a Chinese or Japanese meal it's fine to hold the rice bowl close to your mouth; in Korean custom the bowl is left on the table. And then there are chopsticks: While fun to master, they also have their own etiquette.

Many Asian meals are communal, with dishes being shared. Ordering is a group effort, too, with each diner having a say. Courtesy and Chinese custom say that the elderly should be served first. Take your fair share from the platters and, near the end of the meal, don't take the last serving of food left on a platter without offering it to the other diners first. It's also nice to follow the Asian custom of serving tea to your fellow diners before you fill your own teacup.

Since food is communal, take care in using your chopsticks when serving yourself. Ideally, ask for another pair of chopsticks that can travel with the communal bowl. Alternatively, you can reverse your chopsticks and use the wide end to choose food from the communal plate. Don't rummage around in the communal bowl to find what you like and never eat directly from the communal dish. Instead, choose a piece close to you and transfer it to your plate or bowl. Once you've touched a piece of food you must take it. And don't pass food from chopsticks to chopsticks - always transfer food to a plate. Transferring directly recalls the Japanese custom of passing bones as a part of a funeral rite. Sauces are for dipping and aren't poured over the food. As with Western etiquette, double dipping in a communal bowl is a no-no.□

Sushi and Sashimi. In Japan, the assorted raw fish dishes called sushi are eaten with chopsticks or the fingers. Whichever method you choose, there's a correct way to dip a piece of sushi into the accompanying soy sauce. So that the sticky rice won't break up, only dip the fish side into the sauce. Then bring the piece to your mouth and eat it in one bite (or two bites if the piece is too large). If you skip tradition altogether and use a fork, cut any piece that are too large to eat in a single bite with your knife and fork.

A typical Japanese meal begins with sashimi - thinly sliced, raw, boneless fish served without rice. Before eating sashimi, mix a dollop of the green horseradish mustard called wasabi into the dish of soy sauce that is provided. The fish is then dipped into the sauce with chopsticks or a fork.

Avocados

Avocado slices are cut and eaten with a fork. When an avocado is served halved, hold the shell

to steady it and scoop out each bite with a spoon. When tuna salad or any other mixture is served in an avocado half, it's fine to hold the shell steady while eating the contents - this time with a fork.

Breads

Bread and rolls are served either on individual bread plates or passed around the table in a basket, in which case diners take one piece, place it on their plate or bread plate, and pass it on. Use your fingers to break off a smaller piece. Butter and eat that piece before breaking off and buttering another one. Toast should be cut in half before it's served. Toast and hot biscuit and muffin halves can be buttered all over at once so that the butter has a chance to melt in.

Fried or flat bread. Naan, pappadam, and puri from India and pita bread from the Middle East are brought whole to the table on plates or in flat baskets. Break or tear off a fairly sizable piece with your fingers and transfer it to your plate, then tear off a smaller piece to eat.

Whole loaf breads. When a whole loaf is served on a cutting board, use the accompanying bread knife to cut the loaf into slices for everyone at the table. Grasp the bread with a clean napkin (ask for one if one is not provided) while you're cutting it. Cut a round loaf in slices rather than wedges. Start by cutting the loaf in half; then turn the loaf 90 degrees and, beginning at one side, cut into thin slices.

Cherry Tomatoes

The trick to eating a whole cherry tomato is to use your knife or the edge of your salad bowl to hold the little tomato steady as you stick a fork into it. Gently push the tines of your fork against the tomato until they puncture it. If the tomato is large, cut it in half by using the holes you just made with the fork as the spot to begin cutting. If the tomato is small enough to fit into your mouth whole, do so. Be very careful to keep your lips closed as you bite gently... they're notorious squirters.

Corn on the Cob

Corn on the cob, eaten with the hands is served at family or informal dinners and is a staple at summer barbecues and seafood bakes or boils. At a formal dinner party corn should be cut off the cob and served in a dish. Perhaps the only rule to follow when enjoying corn on the cob is to eat it as neatly as possible - no noisy, nonstop chomping up and down the rows. Providing corn holders makes the job a lot less messy and can save burned fingers. Insert the prongs into each

end of the corn and use the "handle" to hold on. To butter the corn, put pats or a scoop of butter onto your dinner plate, then using your knife, butter and season only a few rows of corn at a time. There is another school that says that rollin the corn in a communal stick of butter is the way to go. In either case, try not to get your fingers greasy and make frequent use of your napkin.

Frogs Legs

Frogs' legs, which are similar to little chicken drumsticks, can be eaten with either the fingers as a passed hors d'oeuvre or a knife and fork at the table.

Lemons

When squeezing a lemon section over a dish or into tea, shield other diners from squirts by holding a spoon or your cupped hand in front of it as you squeeze. After squeezing, place the lemon on the edge of the plate (or saucer) or drop it into your iced tea.

Olives

Eat olives from an antipasti platter with your fingers; you also use your fingers to remove the pit from your mouth while using your hand as a screen. The pit goes into a small dish provided, or on the side of your plate.

When olives come in a salad, eat them with your fork. Remove a pit from your mouth either with your fingers or by pushing it with your tongue onto your fork; then place the pit on the edge of your dinner plate.

Shish Kebab

Shish kebab are eaten directly from the skewer only when they're served as an hors d'oeuvre. When eating shish kebab as a main course, lift the skewer and use your fork to push and slide the chunks off the skewer and onto your plate. Place the emptied skewer on the edge of your plate and use your knife and fork to cut the meat and vegetables into manageable pieces, one bite at a time.

Soup

Dip the spoon sideways into the soup at the near edge of the bowl, then skim from the front of

the bowl to the back. Sip from the side of the spoon, being careful not to slurp. If the soup is too hot, it's okay to blow gently over the soup in the soon before you put it in your mouth. If you want a bite of bread before eating your soup, don't hold the bread in one hand and the soup spoon in the other. Instead, rest your spoon, then have a bite of bread. To retrieve the last spoonful, slightly tip the bowl away from you as well to reduce the chance of spilling in your lap.

Where do you leave your spoon when you're pausing or finished? If the bowl is shallow, leave it in the bowl; if the bowl is deep or the soup is in a cup, leave the spoon on the underplate or saucer.□

French onion soup. This tricky-to-eat soup required a few pointers. That's because it's topped with a slice of French bread covered with melted cheese. To break through to the soup, take a small amount of cheese onto your spoon and twirl it until the strand forms a small clump. Then cut the strand off neatly by against the edge of the bowl; or you could use a knife for cutting. Using your spoon, and a knife if necessary, cut and eat the bread. Eat the cheese and bread, then enjoy the soup. If any strands of cheese trail from your mouth, bite them off cleanly so that they fall back into the bowl of the spoon.

Tea

Brewed. Either the hostess pours and passes the cups, or the pot is passed and each person serves herself. Strong tea can be diluted with hot water poured from a second pot.

Tea bags. After steeping, let a bag drip briefly into the cup as you remove it and place it on a saucer or plate (no squeezing it with your fingers or the strong). Some restaurants serve a selection of tea bags with a small pot of hot water. It's less messy to put the tea bag into the pot. let it steep, and then pour the tea into your cup.