

DINING SERVICE STYLES – A HISTORY.

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I love knowledge, it is fascinating. I've always had a curious mind, so research comes easily to me. Years ago, when I was studying Catering and Hospitality, it was my first experience of 'Silver Service'. I learnt that it was the clever use of a large spoon and fork for purposes of transferring food from a platter to a diner's plate, always from the left side. I never really questioned it, as I was left-handed and found it quite easy, once I had mastered actually holding and manipulating the cutlery.

Years later, Silver Service emerged as a term for describing an entire service style, not just the basics of 'spoon and fork serve from the left, clear from right stuff' but a whole concept that sought to confuse the industry on so many levels. I can quite see why so many butlers and yacht crew are confused by the use of different terminology. Catering colleges, Swiss hotel schools, erstwhile Food and Beverage Directors and Managers, Chefs, et al, all sought to put their spin on it.

So I have long harboured the desire to explain a few things and present a slightly clearer picture, but first the research and history, because as you will realise, this is the key to much of the mystery and legend that surrounds service styles.....

Not surprisingly, my research tests quite a few theories, so whilst you as a reader may or may not agree, this is the history which as we all know cannot be changed just embellished! But, it does help shape the future, and service does not need to be really so complicated.



Being an inveterate collector of food, cookery and hospitality books, I was able to dig deep and find a lot of facts without leaving home and without going to Professor Google. The many and myriad references to the different styles was confusing.

My theories could be vigorously contested and, indeed, defended, I make no claim to be a founder on new thought, I simply offer it for the consideration of

large teams of servants would continue to serve diners food to their plates, but most diners still preferred to help themselves. This style of service was, as you can imagine, frequently criticized as diners rarely enjoyed hot food as a result, in spite of hot plates and covers that appeared later in the 1700's.

Wines were placed in orderly profusion on the table. The host pouring the wine to his immediate neighbors and then circulating the bottle until empty.



In 1691 François Massialot, a noted French Chef and author of *Le Cuisinier Roial et Bourgeois*, specified that dishes should only be left on the table for 15 minutes and then removed. However, I believe this was generally ignored, it wasn't until about 1810 that systems of dining service in France started to change. It was Prince Alexander Borisovich Kurakin, the Russian Ambassador in Paris to Tsar Alexander who voiced his concerns about the French style of dining room service being both muddly and impractical because food was mostly cold and unpalatable by the time it reached the diner. (At this point, a note to readers: in many instances the kitchens were quite some distance from the dining salons, access was often via an underground tunnel!)



The Russian Ambassador requested that all platters of food should be set out on a course by course, or category basis, on the sideboard and handed by servants to diners in strict rotation i.e. 1st servant offered meat or main dish followed by 2nd servant with vegetables and so on, actually, this formed the basis for what is now known as Butler Service.

This was a much more simplified and elegant style than its French counterpart and became known as "Service a la Russe". By 1880 the new style formed the basis for the Chef, Urbain Dubois, to suggest in his book "Artistic Cookery" how food should be set out for both Service a la Française and Service a la Russe. The sole aim was to eat and enjoy hot food as hot as possible. Previous displays of luxury and extravagance were replaced by the simple principle that everything should be served quickly so as not to lose heat or flavor.

At larger events diners were divided into groups of 8 -10 and each group was served by a Head Steward. Only on ceremonial occasions would ladies be served first, the Lady on the right of the Host would be served first and service continued around the table clockwise, serving diners from the left and clearing

from the right, other than that the Head Steward would know the most senior person at each table who would otherwise be served first.

Wine was originally poured in to the host's glass first so that if there were any cork 'crumbs' they would not be in a guest's glass, however, the wine in the host's glass was never tasted by the host only viewed.

"Service a la Russe" quickly became the new standard, wine was served from the right, food from the left. Food was offered on platters or dishes for the diners to help themselves. Always offered on the left as this easier for right-handed diners to access and reach, rather than awkwardly using one's dominant right hand to take food from the right side, offering some logic to the argument, perhaps?

This service style was split into 2 styles

- I. Diners served themselves from the platters
- II. Diners were served from the platters, using serving cutlery

The first option, though created some problems with smaller, less wealthy households, as to being able to offer such substantial and plentiful platters of food, so the second option was implemented to ensure some portion control and a save of face.

By the late 1880's the French had fully adopted the 'A la Russe' style, the Russians in turn took this style back to Russia, where its popularity remained until the Russian Revolution.

But the French people were missing the lavishness of the traditional Service a la Française style, with all food and trimmings presented in grand style on the dining table or sideboard. Enter the Gueridon style, using a round side table. The traditional sideboard morphed on to a pedestal table and then, equipped with wheels, the Gueridon table or trolley was born.

Although the sideboard was still very often being set up as the buffet, which had become the norm in France, these round tables were set for diners who could walk around and serve themselves. Then came the Gueridon style for real, developed as part of "Service a la Russe" with diners being handed plates of served food from the



true 'moveable feast - the Gueridon trolley, be it hot or cold. In effect, it was a sort of butler or steward come buffet service style.

But all this change must have been a massive relief from what can only be described as a host/hostess's nightmare of a previous party resembling feeding time at the zoo! The majority of the upper classes in the 19th century ate poorly, their food often cold and generally sacrificed quality for quantity and show.

Gueridon service evolved as the demand for 'seen service' grew. It indicated prosperity, it was trending.....

On some occasions the host would be part of the new trend, as the host or Head Steward or Maitre d' 'finished' some of the salads, fruits or desserts in front of the diners. It was perceived as something different. Vive la difference!

Meanwhile in America, another style was emerging – "Service a l'Assiette" a simple style born out of pure practicality. All food was placed directly on the plate by the host and passed to the diner. This style came about as the result of the difference in culture highlighted by Thomas Jefferson, who had spent some time in Paris between 1784 -1789, when he compared Europe to America. " In Europe the object is to make the most of all their land, labor being abundant. Here is it to make the most of our labour , land being abundant". It is thought that households did not have many interior staff due to the need for them to be on the land, so families did not expect to be served in the same way, however, with religious influences, many diners seemed to be served from the right.

Although, the English had rapidly adopted "Service a la Russe", their natural reserve dictated their distrust of offering platters to everyone to help themselves as this meant they would need twice as much food not so easy for an island nation. So they took the second style of "A la Russe" and developed a new style using a silver [table] spoon and [table] fork style of serving portions from platters to diners.



"Service a l'Anglaise" was born. It quickly became known as "Silver Service" very popular in both homes and restaurants as a flashy new style.

However, households still preferred the true “Service a la Russe” and co-opted their butlers into using this style, I imagine this might be why many people call this ‘Butler Service’ and correctly speaking it is, as the basis of “Service a la Russe” required many servants to offer around and serve the food in order to ensure it’s quality and temperature. Like the French the English ran 2 styles of service, really, generally in England, the standards of “Service a la Russe” were maintained, just the actual platter offering and service style were adjusted.

Amusingly, as a diner on the receiving end of this service in England, and seated in a particular place around the table, one might find him or herself in what comically has become known as ‘starvation corner’ as supplies on the butler-served platter ran low. Something that, hopefully, doesn’t happen too often these days!

So, in summary of this dining service style evolution:

FRENCH TERMINOLOGY

ENGLISH TERMINOLOGY

Service a la Française

French Service

Based on the traditional style, this standard of service would, by today’s standard be best described as a mix of plated, butler and family service. With plated main components i.e. protein, on individual diner’s plate, and platters of other foods, such as vegetables and potatoes being offered by the butler/server, or all foods placed on the dining table for general service. Plates, at the correct temperature are placed from the left, food is offered and served traditionally from the left, but either side of diner appears to be acceptable. Wine and all beverages are served from the right. Plates are cleared from the right.

Service a la Russe

Russian Service

Traditionally butler service, but in modern day use, this is a combination of Silver Service, Butler service and a little bit of Family service, with almost all food being silver-served, course by course, to diners’ plates. Plates, at the correct temperature for the food are placed from the left, then platters of food presented from the left and after service to



all diners are placed on centre of table, or offered butler service style, for further enjoyment by diners. Traditionally, all food is served from the left and plates are cleared from the right. Wine and all beverages are served from the right.

Service a la Buffet

Buffet Service

All food is presented on a buffet or sideboard, plates form either part of the table setting or are located close to the buffet table. Tables are usually set with all cutlery, glassware, napkins and condiments. Wine and all beverages are served from the Plates are cleared by service staff from the right.

Service a la Gueridon

Table Service

A more extrovert, flamboyant style of service, it forms part of other service styles, usually featuring flambé or bespoke salads and desserts. Food is cooked, or finished, if appropriate, on the Gueridon burner or trolley. The Gueridon trolley is positioned at a convenient and safe location to the dining table and diners. Contemporarily, there is a high degree of flair and showmanship, service staff must be competent at both social interaction, flambé work and presentation of food. When complete each plate of food is passed to individual diners.

Service a l'Assiette

American Service

All food is plated, either in the kitchen servers area or by the host or senior service staff, on appropriate plates, at correct temperatures and served from the right or left, both are correct, but should be consistent. Wine, and beverages are served and cleared from the right and plates are also cleared from the right.



Service a l'Anglaise

English Service

This style has evolved be a combination of Silver Service and Butler Service. Diner's plates, at correct temperature, are placed from the left. All food is presented on platters, or serving trays, from the left using a large to medium

size spoon and fork to lift and place food attractively on the diner's plate. Silver service cutlery is held firmly in the server's most comfortable hand so that they form a style of tongs. Incidentally, tongs are never recommended for Silver Service. Generally speaking the food is placed logically on the plate with the main component at the front part of the diner's plate and accompaniments placed accordingly. Wine and beverages are served and cleared from the right. Plates are also cleared from the right side.

Other service styles that have developed as part of 'ceremonial' requirements include:

- ❖ Royal – often referred to as Silent Service as little or no sound should be heard other than the conversation of the Royal Personages. Requires a lot of discipline.
- ❖ Synchronised – each action of the servers are carefully practiced and synchronized so as to create a well-choreographed occasion with diners being served at the same time. When done well, it is a joy!
- ❖ Diamond/Crystal – this is quite an ancient style of service, whereby each diner has a butler/footman/server to cater for their every whim or desire in terms of food or beverage service
- ❖ Dome/Cloche – a style of food presentation that requires a silver plated dome to cover each diners plate. The dome is then lifted in synchronised fashion to reveal the 'surprise'.

All these styles can be adapted to enhance the basic service styles, they are merely variations on a theme.

When it comes to actually serving, it should be remembered that although the names given to these service styles are attributed to a particular country or culture, that does not mean that the diners of those countries use or prefer that style. Knowing the basic service standards of each style should assist in assessing the situation, the type of diner, any limitations and most importantly that food is served promptly and in a palatable state.

It really just depends on who you are serving and how they would like to be served!

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My next piece will feature Tablecloths and Napkins – a history.

