



Goodness... Dining Out Is Gracious

BY VERA MILLER

DO YOU remember on the way to South Haven you would have a real treat and stop on the road around St. Joe for one of those 15 dip ice cream cones and when it was passed over the counter and the small change was exchanged it was a day never to be forgotten. Not only were the recipients thrilled but the counter-men were gracious and handed each child the cone as if this was truly the epitome of gracious dining.

Book after book, page after page and column after paid column extol the gracious dining available at this grotto or another. What in the world has happened to the art of dining out? Dining out should be an occasion of relaxation and pleasurable conversation.

TAKE SATURDAY nights for instance. Go to any restaurant. About the only smiling people in the whole place are (1) the hat check girl who finds human conversation more satisfying than her cloth companions limply attending her for the evening and (2) the maid in the ladies room who can offer the most wonderful advice on everything from what to order that particular evening to what to tell the sitter if the baby does not want to sleep during the late, late movie.

"ATMOSPHERE"

Everyone else around the place maintains a stoic remoteness of dignity. The hostess or maitre'd escorts you to the table as if you are 6 years old and you just had better hurry to the table and sit down or . . . you won't get to eat at all! This social director then turns you over to the practicing intern.

'TIS TRUE that table linen must be changed but as soon as you are seated in front of the cluttered first party left-overs, this gallant chap rushes over and scoops crockery and tableware noisily into his tin cart . . . this starts the degeneration of the evening. Thence to the changing to the new. Tell me, is it not like lying in a hospital bed and having the sheets changed while you are still in the bed? . . . Fold, fold, unfurl, fold and . . . plopplop and a sweep of the hand and there we are—all nice and neat and spanking white. The salt and pepper are placed on the worn spots and away we go for a fun-filled evening.

In the center sets a glowing candle or burning lamp so placed that close table conversation is akin to the appearance of a fortune-telling seance.

THEN APPEARS the waitress to take the order. Etiquette once

demanding that the lady give her order to her escort who carried the ball from there. Not so today. It's a tennis match between three people. "Yes, that's one rare beef," "No, that's one asparagus I ordered on my dinner," etc. and etc. A waitress is the social hostess for her particular group of tables as though she were representative of the fine hospitality of the restaurant.

COUNT THE SMILES

But what happens when this Nightengale of the table-for-two set has had a battle royale with the kitchen personnel and starts out with you as though you are the trophy won in a hard battle. Emerging triumphant from the kitchen she takes your order and announces each written sentence as though she were auditioning for the job as master-of-ceremonies at Soldier's Field—sans mike.

AS THE ordering continues you will discover there are three—count 'em—three kinds of salad dressing. Listen closely and you will hear them clearly and indistinctly pronounced. Dressing is a crowning glory to a chef's art of color painting with nature's rewards, but to listen to the ordering of the dressings . . . well, do you get the feeling the waitress knows something about what is going on at the salad table in the kitchen that you don't? And she really wants to get this camouflage order over with.

The next time you're enjoying the gracious custom of dining out—count the smiling customers. And for real fun, count the number of people who anticipate sugar cubes as they make conversation and dip pinkies into the sugar bowl. And if you really want to cause havoc. . . . Ask for more rolls.

ASK FOR more butter, or water, or tarter sauce . . . but rolls! One of these days I'm just going to unzip a package of refrigerated rolls from the folds of my evening purse, set them atop the romantic candle table piece and rewoo my husband with the aroma of fresh baked rolls. This may even start a whole new trend in dining out in the do-it-yourself manner.