Last Man Serving

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A lot has been said and written about the decline in manners in today's society. Children not offering their seats on public transport, talking/texting on mobile phones when out with friends and people not holding doors open for strangers are just a few examples of this. Even at home, the 'phone demands to be answered no matter what you might be doing at the time.

What particularly irks me is a generally unremarked upon trend occurring in our restaurants. It's when a waiter tries to remove someone's finished plate from the table while others are still eating. It really does my head in. I surveyed a few good Sydney restaurants to gauge the current practice. Apparently, it *is* acceptable, depending on the time of day. At breakfast and "casual" lunch (I'm not sure how you would define such a lunch exactly) you can do it. As one head waiter said: "Some people may want to use their laptop after they've finished eating so we need to clear space for it". (Mustn't waste a minute!) My research revealed, however, that at dinner the top restaurants never do it. In France they always ask: "Vous avez termine?" before touching anything, even if you're just having breakfast in a cheap brasserie in the Latin Quarter.

I was at dinner with friends at a middle-of-the-road French restaurant in Sydney last year. We were a table of ten and one person had finished their main before the rest of us. The waiter swooped and, without asking, took the plate away. He was halfway to the kitchen before I asked him to bring it back. I patiently explained to him that no plate was to be removed from the table until we had all finished eating. It took him a while to find my friend's plate from the pile he had gathered from another table. He did it with good grace but must have thought I was insane – insisting he bring a used plate back to the table! And not just any plate – it had to be the prematurely removed one. My friends seemed a bit embarrassed by my somewhat strange behaviour but one of them told me a few months later that she was proud of me for being so insistent.

Of course, I understand why waiters do it. They're told to be busy, don't waste a trip to the kitchen if you can take something else with you and besides, there are some people who actually want their plate taken away as

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soon as they've finished, regardless of what stage of eating their dining companions are at.

Am I being too picky? I don't think so. We normally don't start eating until everyone has been served or at least we wait until those who haven't been served give their permission for us to start. I think the same should happen at the end of the meal. We start together, we should finish together and no one is left feeling awkward because they've either eaten too slowly or too quickly.

Ceremony has played an essential role in human existence since the beginnings of time. While ceremony has largely disappeared from our lives, the important tradition of sharing a meal and the protocols associated with it deserve our respect and vigilance.

A few months later I was back at the same restaurant with a different group of friends. The waiter from my last visit was there. I thought I noticed a flash of recognition (or was it horror?) as our eyes met. The evening passed without incident.