

## Enhancing Meal Time

Dear Homekeeper,

One of my favorite things is enjoying a meal with family or friends at the table. If food is drama, then the table is the stage, like a stage backdrop. Setting the table or creating a tablescape (the latter usually involves a centerpiece) sets the mood and creates the atmosphere for the meal.

Adding simple and sweet (K.I.S.S.) decorative touches enhances the meal gathering.

As a Homekeeper, your efforts to create a haven may not immediately be noticed by family or guests. Initially, these efforts may seem insignificant, but over time they become meaningful.

Meal times are a product of everything that makes us human, time, and attention, involves all the senses and sensations especially true when shared in companionship\* My mother once said having a meal together is one of the key aspects of developing human socialization habits.

The table can take many forms: could be on a picnic blanket outside a cozy spot in front of the fireplace, or even finger food on a coffee table. (Tip: Dishes don't have to match but for cohesiveness try for one similar color somewhere in the setting.)

After a month at a Colorado camp that served delicious home-cooked meals (including weekly Cordon Bleu!), I asked my kids on the drive home what they wanted for their homecoming meal. The choice was fast food, or frozen food fast. Chagrined, I agreed.

When I do managed to gather everyone for a meal, I cooked a 3-course meal featuring the food groups. They would sit in front of their plate and move the food, not eating it, all the while telling me it was good. I would catch them later sneaking into the kitchen later for a PB&J.

During meal time, I subtly introduced some rules of etiquette: hats off, no screens time, mouths closed when chewing and napkins used. Dining at home is a safe place to learn the differences between cafeteria-style and eating at a restaurant.

Home evening dinners together in my house were served sparingly due to schedules. When the stars lined up and everyone was present, I would set the table the night before to create anticipation which ended up becoming a cue for my daughter. She initiated a volunteer effort, turning it into scavenger hunt to dress the table.

She'd look for flowers and greenery, or add some seashells collection, pinecones, small votive candles for set on the upper side of each plate, would use brown wrapping paper as a table runner drawing hearts and stars on it. Sometimes forgetting space for the food! That's when we served buffet-style, using the pass-through window counter from the kitchen to the dining room for entrees.

Speaking of buffets, I like to carve fruit. I did an eatable tablescape display for a celebration at a 90-year-old grandmother's birthday buffet spread. At home I usually will carve maybe one piece of fruit and plate so it will be eaten). Once while staying at a shabby rustic (!) beach cabin in a set-apart designated area we ate alfresco. I brought along twinkling lights to hang (saw the cabin picture beforehand) and carved up watermelon. Not into carving, the internet is full of suggestions to plate fruit and vegetables in colorful (sometimes funny) displays.

My oldest son works in the hospitality business on the East Coast. He knows dining etiquette and can serve food with flair. I've learned from his expertise and often incorporate restaurant presentation ideas at home. This same guy at his wedding rehearsal meal served only appetizers

from nosh, hors d'oeuvres, crudities and decadent dessert bites, making sure there was enough for each guest to have three.

Recognize that your home, with all its uniqueness, is a gift. Cultivating a welcoming space doesn't have to take a lot of money, just a little intentionality. And that's something we've all got. And, if like me, you eat alone), stay tuned for the next topic on solo dining.

Until then Warmest Regards. [Cathery.ch@gmail.com](mailto:Cathery.ch@gmail.com)

P. S. It can seem fleeting but every good meal experience is a memory. (\*Marcel Rouff)