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Eating Your Way to a Job Offer

 by [Carole Martin](#)

Monster Interview Coach

Whether it's breakfast, lunch or dinner, interviewing at a meal is a tricky business that could make or break the impression you want to create. The atmosphere is more casual than an office, and you may be tempted to let down your guard and consider this a social event. But remember: This is still part of the interview and should be treated accordingly, both in how you act and talk.

Make Sure Both the Fork and the Words Are the Right Ones

Kristy had done her homework before the interview and carefully placed the napkin on her lap when she sat down. She remembered to order a simple meal, nothing too messy. And, of course, she did not order alcohol, as this was no time to get chatty. She ate while her interviewer talked so she could talk without food in her mouth when it was her turn to answer questions. She was careful not to let the utensil touch the table once she had used it, and when finished, she placed the utensils side by side on the plate. She placed her napkin on the table when she was through and sighed with relief. She had done everything according to the book and was very pleased with her performance.

Unfortunately, she was so focused on making a good impression with her table manners, she didn't notice her host asking personal -- and illegal -- questions.

"Yes, I have two kids," she answered. "They are both in daycare, and it does make for a hectic morning, I agree," she replied to the interviewer's sympathetic statements about working and taking care of a family. The interviewer was

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certainly getting more than she bargained for at the cost of a meal, and now had information that would take Kristy out of the running because of concern over her children and daycare arrangements. Unfortunate and illegal, but it happens.

During the entire interview, everything we say and do is open to scrutiny. Because a restaurant's atmosphere is friendly and there are distractions, it is easy to forget this is not a social event. There are many horror stories about candidates seasoning food before tasting or asking interviewers if they are going to eat the last halves of their meals. Who would make such blatant errors? Not you, because you've prepared for all of that. But the real trap is in the conversation and what you could reveal.

You should remain confident and professional throughout the entire meal. This does not mean acting stiffly or unfriendly -- be yourself and practice your social skills. This is a great time for you to listen and respond, and may be an opportunity to learn about the company while your interviewers are relaxed and willing to talk more candidly. This is not a time to gossip about previous officemates or the companies you've worked for, even if your interviewer heads in that direction. If you are uncomfortable with the discussion, simply smile and refrain from commenting. Try to steer the conversation back to the job and company.

Remember: A major component of the dining interview is for the interviewer to gauge how you perform in a social setting. Table manners are important, and you should read about basic table etiquette if you need a brush up. If you make an etiquette mistake or use the wrong fork, don't draw attention to it; chances are no one will even notice. But they will remember an inappropriate comment or answer.

Keep in mind, this is not your friend taking you to lunch because he likes you. This is a business situation with someone who is judging whether you are the right person for a position. The interview meal is very much a part of the interview. Bon appetite!

General Dining Interview Tips

- Follow general interview rules: arrive on time, wear proper clothes and be ready to talk experience -- but not with your mouth full.
- Follow your interviewer's lead regarding food and beverages. If he or she is

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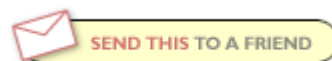
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having wine, you might too, if you're comfortable.

- Order something in the middle of the menu prices, if you order first. If you can let others be your guide, select an item in the price range they set.
- Avoid messy foods such as spaghetti, spareribs, crab or fried chicken.
- Remember your table manners. Put your napkin in your lap immediately; place it on the chair when leaving the table. No elbows, no smoking and no fingers.
- Discuss your skills and other relevant issues between bites. If asked a question as you've taken a mouthful, wait until you swallow. Make eye contact to indicate your willingness; your tablemates will understand.
- Keep up with the table -- don't eat faster or slower than everyone else.
- Order dessert if others have. If not, pass it up.

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