



# The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities and Meaning of Table Manners

*Margaret Visser*

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**The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities and Meaning of Table Manners** Margaret Visser

With an acute eye and an irrepressible wit, Margaret Visser takes a fascinating look at the way we eat our meals. From the ancient Greeks to modern yuppies, from cannibalism and the taking of the Eucharist to formal dinners and picnics, she thoroughly defines the eating ritual.

## **The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities and Meaning of Table Manners Details**

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# **From Reader Review The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities and Meaning of Table Manners for online ebook**

## **MargaretDH says**

I love cooking, and love cooking for others. This is a fascinating exploration of how and why we share food with one another. Visser digs into many of the rituals, traditions and taboos we take for granted and examines their underpinnings and development. It made me think a lot of about why I like sharing food with others, and how we divide people based on food choice and table manners.

I also love gathering trivia, and this book is EXCELLENT for that. Do you know the difference between meals served a la francaise and a la russe? Did you know that people used to keep dogs for the purpose of eating the bones and waste food thrown on the floor? Did you know that one culture used to irrevocably divorce by breaking the family cooking pots? Did you know the difference between endo and ex0-cannibalism?

I'm giving this four stars because I might have wished for a slightly stronger through line argument or conclusion, but this was fascinating and I'd recommend it to anyone who likes to cook and eat in groups, or is interested in why we do the things we take for granted at the table.

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## **Linda Gaines says**

This book was recommended to me by a friend, and it looked like it covered an interesting topic. It does. I felt like I learned quite a bit from it. The only problem is that it was just written so boringly, maybe academic, I don't know. I slogged through it. I wanted to learn more, but I just had the worst time getting through it. It could have used a better editor because there were several tidbits in it that while interesting just increased the length of an already really long book.

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## **Diana Sandberg says**

I very much enjoyed Visser's previous book, "Much Depends on Dinner". This one is similar in its anecdotal delving into the minutiae of ordinary human preoccupations and behaviour. I heard Visser speak on the radio a few times, some years ago, and she was a charming and enthusiastic speaker; some of that infused the first book, somewhat less in this longer tome.

I found this one a bit overlong and somewhat disorganized. The latter chapters in particular gave something of an impression of having been hurried along - perhaps the publisher was getting impatient?

The book is so packed with tidbits of historical/anthropological interest that one cannot hope to retain most of them, at least not without re-reading the book, probably repeatedly. But I do enjoy such tidbits and, overall, found the book rewarding.

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## **Tracey says**

Visser starts with cannibalism, and from there, follows the development of meals and their accoutrements, as well as the social behaviours that allow us to eat together. Visser writes with both detail and touches of humour, providing a very sound basis for exploring the topic further. An extensive notes & bibliography section is provided, as well as an index.

Overall, a wonderfully detailed look at how and why we eat, in terms of sociology & human relationships.

I read the majority of this in a medical facility waiting room (nothing too serious) & it kept my attention in a distracting environment; despite the fussy grandchildren and the socially backwards guy who kept trying to engage anyone & everyone in conversation, Visser led me thru medieval feasting halls, Greek symposia and Japanese tea ceremonies with grace and wit.

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## **Abby says**

I picked this book up at the library book sale, knowing nothing about it, and I am so glad I did. Margaret Visser, a professor at the University of Toronto, provides a delightful tour through the history of table manners, from ancient Greece to 20th-century North America. I especially loved her meaningful reflections on culture and how we form it and how it forms us. Her style is meandering, and she seems to find it difficult to focus on one topic, but I liked her vast, wandering approach, and it seemed fitting for the subject matter. Recommended for casual history buffs and students of human culture.

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## **David Szatkowski says**

This is a worthy book, but 3 stars due to age (the book was published nearly 30 years ago). However, the history is quite readable and interesting. There is something here for you if you like history, history of eating/food, cultural comparisons, and even theology (the section on the importance of meals in different cultures). This is a great read if you find it in the library or second hand store to take on a flight, or read over a lazy weekend.

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## **Jill says**

Visser's *The Rituals of Dinner* is definitely one of the most scholarly works I've read on food and eating. It is, quite simply, a sweeping survey of the rules and customs that govern our behaviour at the table - from why we have rituals and customs in the first place, the different rules that govern what we eat, when we eat, how we eat, with whom we eat, etc. It's challenging to give a sense of how broad the scope of Visser's book is; it's all in here - from cannibalism to chopsticks, carving (that section was a great deal of fun to read) to vomiting, the dinner service to the dinner sequence.

At 357 pages, it took me a while to make it through the book. The scholarly approach makes it heavy going

in some parts but the book is scattered with interesting nuggets that make the journey worthwhile. Like: "for much of history, scent was thought essential to festivity (partly but by no means entirely because crowds of people quickly smell rank), and incense and perfume were especially appreciated at dinner. Ancient Egyptian frescoes show us dinner guests with large cones of scented fat fixed to the tops of their heads; these were designed to melt during the feast, and drizzle deliciously down over the diners' faces and bodies" (!!)

Or: "Confusing as it seems to us at first sight, the words "host" and "guest" originally mean the same thing. They both derive from Indo-European ghosts, "stranger". This is the origin of the Latin hosts, which meant "stranger" and therefore "enemy"; from it English derives the word "hostile"...What this single term refers to is not so much the individual people, the host and the guest, as the bond that unites them"

Or: "The phrase "pot luck" was originally used when inviting someone to a very informal family dinner, on the spur of the moment. The visitor was to expect nothing specially prepared, but only what the family would have eaten that day in any case. The guest's "luck" lay in what day he or she happened to arrive and what meal had been prepared for the family. The phrase has changed its meaning with the increasing popularity of meals or parties where the guests come with contributions of food: the "luck" now lies in the uncertainty about what everyone will bring"

For anyone who's interested in a more substantive look at the food we eat and the culture surrounding it.

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### **Rachele Rosi-Kessel says**

This is not a book about where the forks and spoons go (though there is some of that, too). It's a grand overview of how we treat people in our lives and how the evolution of how we eat at table reflects the changing view of our neighbors, friends, enemies, children, women, animals and ourselves. I highly recommend it, especially if you think having a sit-down dinner with family and friends is just too difficult for your schedule. You might find a new appreciation for manners and what they can teach us about being human.

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### **Netts says**

There is a wonderful wealth of information here about the evolution and rationale of table manners throughout history. For that I definitely recommend it. One particularly neat aspect being the frequent tidbits about the parallel evolution of linguistics, and idioms in particular. Though it offers a bit less on contemporary table manners and current differences around the world than one might expect.

But the book has some notable problems. I found the constant use of first person pronouns to make vast generalizations ("we choose", "our disgust", etc.) quite alienating and kept wondering who she was talking to/about, as it was never clarified. Is this "we" representative of all humans? That's fairly easily contradicted, especially within a book focusing on the different ways in which cultures approach food. If the "we" refers solely to Western audiences, it seems rather condescending ("we" versus "them"). And even that would make no sense when, again, even in the "Western world" differences abound between countries and regions and

social groups.

The other issue with her writing is a penchant for repetition that makes the first and last few chapters particularly tedious. In those she introduces and concludes the themes of the book but without really synthesizing and could have really used the help of an editor to cut out at least 50 pages.

Finally, there is an attempt to make it seem as if this is an exhaustive look at global rituals around food but more than once subjects are introduced and then dropped with no explanation, with paragraphs like these serving as placeholders: "Toothpicks, fairly successfully banished in England and America, have never been entirely rejected from the European Continent; it would be interesting to know just who uses them today, when, and what the strictures are." Well, yes, now that you bring it up, it WOULD be interesting! But immediately after that sentence she segues into other subjects leaving that ridiculous "wouldn't it be great if someone actually looked into this" dangling there with no further follow-up. No book can cover every detail and this one goes into interesting depth on a lot of topics but this kind of writing makes it feel incomplete despite the huge amount of information it DOES contain.

It is still worth reading despite the stylistic flaws. It's just not as enjoyable as it could have been. My final impression was that if a better author had taken this exact information and done a better job of actually writing it, I could have given this book an enthusiastic five stars.

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### **Rachel Smalter Hall says**

This is where I found out about exo- and endo- cannibals (one kind eats his enemies, the other kind eats his friends), and the French Fourteenths (did a dinner guest cancel leaving you with an unlucky thirteen guests? Call up a Fourteenth!), and so much more great cocktail party fodder. One of the more fascinating books I think I've ever read, backed by a convincing argument that we'd all eat each other given the chance.

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### **Scot says**

Perhaps a bit dated (first published in 1991), this sweeping overview of the history of table manners, across cultures and across time, nevertheless retains charm and insight. It catches your attention with an opening chapter on the cultural rules of cannibalism in the different societies that practiced it. This is followed by a chapter on how children and novitiates are socialized into correct etiquette in all cultures, and then the basic steps of all feasting or dinner gatherings are overviewed in turn: the invitation process, the presentation and serving of the meal, the appropriate way to consume it, the manner of formally finishing the procedure and bidding the hosts adieu.

The Canadian author draws heavily on Classical and European history with a target focus on late 20th century North American dinner manners, but certainly brings in many examples and anecdotes from the Near East, the Far East, Africa, and Oceania as well. She has a tendency to often show how the etymological origin of words and terms associated with food and dining are related to archetypes, myths, and earlier traditions, and she seems fluent and knowledgeable in many different languages past and present, so those interested in linguistics or cultural anthropology will especially enjoy this book. As the postscript reveals and her very diverse collection of evidence substantiates, a driving component of so much of dining etiquette in all cultures is related to perceptions of gender role distinctions, binary duality fundamentals of belief

systems, and basic fears of loneliness and death being assuaged by the ceremony of civilization.

You probably won't retain all the bits of knowledge here--but you're bound to find some intriguing explanations for many things you have taken for granted in your own code of etiquette or have wondered about in the behaviors of other cultures you have experienced. Plus, you'll be well armed with all kinds of small talk trivia from history and anthropology the next time you find yourself seated across from a dining companion and struggling to come up with a conversation starter. So, Cheers...and bon appetit!

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### **David Pearce says**

I was fascinated throughout this book which I appropriately digested in bite size pieces every evening. Every page contained at least one piece of information that surprised me and the writing was engaging making dining and food a subject that constantly interested me even as the information became more and more in depth. I would wholeheartedly recommend this book but don't wolf it down in one sitting as it may give you mental indigestion!!

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### **Lisa Kelsey says**

A fascinating look at an endlessly fascinating subject (to me at least!): the origins of dinner table manners. One thing that I found particularly interesting as a mother is the comparison between etiquette and healthy eating. Here, Visser compared the French family table with the American: the American family will pressure kids to eat their vegetables "because it's healthy." French children are taught to sample a little bit of everything simply because that is what is polite. It seems to be more attainable to learn to be polite than to learn something as vague as to "eat healthy." French kids end up sampling a wider variety of foods which in turn is a healthy way to eat. And it all starts with table manners.

There is so much more I learned from this book I'll have to revisit this review later.

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### **Worteldrie says**

Zeer erudiet en doordacht boek over tafelmanieren. Alles wordt belicht. Veel werelddelen en -tijden worden ogenschijnlijk gemakkelijk in elkaar overlopend behandeld. Geen geringe prestatie. Ik merk alleen dat ik niet alles over tafelmanieren even interessant vind.

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### **Ruth says**

Didn't make it past page 30 of this dull repetitive book.

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