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TRAVEL



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RITZ-CARLTON; J.J. RITTER PHOTO

In the Ritz-Carlton Palm Beach, under crystal chandeliers and Italian marble, business people gather to learn from Jacqueline Whitmore, below right, how to avoid faux pas and seal deals with perfect protocol.

Kiss, kiss the Ritz way

Learning the minutiae of proper etiquette

BY JUDITH RITTER
in Palm Beach

It's settled.

"If you're at a social event with Bill Gates and G.E.'s Jack Welsh, introduce Bill Gates to Jack Welsh not Jack Welsh to Bill Gates. That's the definitive answer!" explains Jacqueline Whitmore. She's not only the authority on such matters, but also our teacher at The Ritz-Carlton Palm Beach's business etiquette course.

She explains that in a social situation, Bill gets introduced to Jack — as in "Jack, I would like to introduce to you Bill Gates" — because Jack is older and is therefore, the person of honour and has his name said first. In a business situation, the rule is power, so Jack would be introduced to Bill, because Bill is richer.

Whitmore, a perky young woman in a classic suit and pumps, is here in one of the state-of-the-art dining rooms of the Ritz-Carlton with four of us, her new students, set to tackle the complexities of business protocol. Under the crystal chandeliers, in a world of Italian marble and Persian carpets, we're play acting a social situation in which we introduce ourselves, we introduce each other and we introduce the imaginary richest men in the world to one another (in the off chance we run into them).

Why brush up our social graces? Because there is a revival

of etiquette, a craving for old-fashioned good manners in the corporate world, and business people, according to the latest studies, are woefully lacking in decorum.

We're gathered here at the Palm Beach Ritz (where else?) for a three-hour session (including a five-course practice dinner), combining a holiday in Palm Beach with professional development. We are otherwise bold and successful people, but, as we find out, deep within we are secretly afraid, very afraid.

Whitmore knows that, so she begins our session with a kind of confessional. "My worst fear is making a mistake at the dinner table," admits Debra, a nurse, who will be travelling for her business internationally. Landon, a young, impeccably dressed real estate agent, is consumed with a desire to "get to a higher level" of etiquette, and perfect the continental-style use of utensils as opposed to his knife-and-fork-switching American style. Our other partner in protocol, Magda, wants to learn the art of working a room. Collectively, we have a fear of forks (which one?), fear of handshakes (too limp?), fear of networking and, generally, fear of floundering and blowing that big deal. The Ritz-Carlton course will teach us classic niceties, such as silverware savvy, making an entrance, introducing ourselves, working a room and, at the cutting edge of etiquette, the gracious use of electronic technology. In short, we'll learn manners for everything from removing a bit of food from your tooth to courteous use of wireless technology.

In our Ritz course there's handshaking practice, small talk exercises and even a lesson geared for globalization, the European air kiss. "Notice. I did the smacking sound. Our cheeks might have touched, but my lips never touched her cheek," Whitmore says as we practice smiling, smacking and not touching, all under the watchful eye of several Ritz employees, who, like Ritz employees around the world, have been trained in the minutiae of etiquette.

The Ritz-Carlton offers etiquette classes because, well, because they are The Ritz, according to Roberto van Geenen, the general manager of the Palm Beach hotel. "We do see ourselves as the keepers of good manners, discreet advisers on etiquette. People turn to the Ritz-Carlton and we feel an obligation to be knowledgeable about the traditions." Van Geenen is European, perfectly tailored, charming, gracious and, in his desire to preserve civility and stem the tide of boorishness, much like Ritz founder Caesar Ritz a century ago. From Palm Beach to Hong Kong, The Ritz-Carlton company is not only the guardian of social and business etiquette, but also the professor emeritus. The hotel sponsors seminars, and functions as a kind of manners hotline for distraught CEOs, confused guests and, to use van Geenen's words, a protocol resource for "people on the wealth management side."

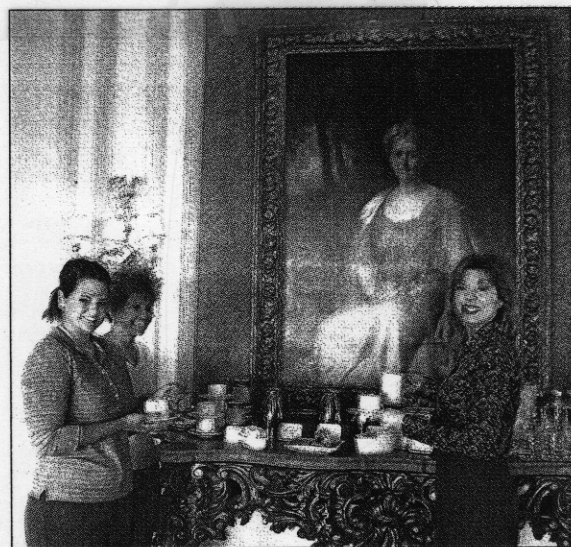
Van Geenen and Whitmore have numerous examples of manners queries, jobs lost to poor protocol and deals sealed with excellent etiquette, like an SOS from a CEO for a quick

course for his right-hand man who blew a board meeting by dipping his bread in the soup.

The cautionary tale of soup slurping fresh in our minds, we're seated for a five-course Ritz-Carlton meal with at least seven pieces of cutlery on the table and reproduced on large flip charts. The which and when of spoons, bowls and butter knives is as important as an MBA nowadays and courses like this one are doing a booming business. Throughout the meal, Whitmore peppers us with etiquette edicts as she discreetly corrects one or another of our faux pas. We eat up the information along with a spectacular dinner — wild mushroom consommé with Madeira, truffled lobster ravioli and warm asparagus salad are some of the highlights.

Fork and knife placed close together in the centre of our plates to indicate we're finished, we exit our chairs on the right side, ask our final questions and shake hands firmly, remembering to hold the other's hand for just one extra second to "convey sincerity." For \$320 and three hours of our holiday time, we have become part of a breed of business people confident and calm, ready and able to do a deal with anyone, even "people on the wealth management side." Governments are in crisis, dams burst, wars wax and wane and, somewhere far away, the Earth is shaking. Civilization may be under siege but in this quiet, elegant room, except for the almost soundless tinkle of ice in a glass, our rough edges are smoothed and all is well with the world.

Weekend Post



ART TOUR AND HIGH TEA

While polishing up your social graces at The Ritz-Carlton, why not top off the etiquette course with a 40-minute guided tour of The Ritz-Carlton art collection followed by proper afternoon tea. Every Friday (and by appointment), the hotel offers a tour of its multi-million-dollar collection of paintings with Ritz art consultant, the colourful Jane Oliver.

Oliver, who has been involved in the art world for decades, guides guests through the lobbies, hallways, ballrooms and restaurants of the hotel, past Louis XIV furniture, sculpture and museum-quality paintings.

The collection consists of pieces mainly from The Romantic period, including the hotel's most valuable piece, a 19th-century landscape by German painter Karl Heffner and

a compelling painting by renowned portraitist Thomas Gainsborough. Oliver offers interpretation of, and anecdotes about, the art and artifacts, but always punctuated by humour.

The see-and-be-seen afternoon tea that follows the tour is steeped in style and a good opportunity to people watch. Many of Palm Beach's society matrons top off Worth Avenue shopping trips with tea at the hotel. We just missed the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire when we took the tour and tea, but did get to enjoy the scones and clotted cream that bear the Devonshire royals' name.

■ The Ritz-Carlton: ritzcarlton.com

■ Jacqueline Whitmore: etiquetteexpert.com

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