

Mess Etiquette - Mess Dinners and Formal Mess Balls

General

1. Mess dinners provide an opportunity for members to meet on a formal but friendly occasion, allowing the Chairman or his guests to address the members as a group. By custom and tradition Mess dinners are considered to be a formal event and as such a parade.
2. The following provides a guide to the general procedures for Mess dinners and formal Mess balls. Tradition may produce variation at various events, therefore members should acquaint themselves with the special customs or variations. It is the members responsibility to brief visitors or guests on Mess customs, especially if they vary from usual procedures.

RSVP

3. RSVP - "Répondez s'il vous plaît", a French phrase that translates to "please respond" and word for word translation is "respond if you please"
4. There are few things more aggravating for a Mess Dinner organizer than wondering who's coming to dinner, and how many times arrangements will have to change due to late RSVPs. It's really quite simple: when you receive the invitation, answer the RSVP in a timely manner.
5. VIPs and guests can affect the seating plan and also arrangements for programmed events at the dinner. They may be asked to speak, and then possibly "unasked" when some higher priority guest decides at the last minute to announce their availability. Slow responses to RSVPs cause extra work and stress which are completely unnecessary. The attendance of any guest at a Mess Dinner should not cause the organizer an extra burden of work above what should be expected if they attend. To do so by responding late to an RSVP is, quite simply, rude and inappropriate. And for those who might claim scheduling uncertainty, a tentative "yes" is always much better than a last minute "no."

Guests

6. Frequently, guests may be invited to Mess dinners. Guests will be in one of two categories as follows:
 - a. Special Guests - a guest that the Legion, has a social or public obligation to entertain and for whom the Mess may be financially responsible; and
 - b. Personal Guests - a person whom a member invites and for whom the member is responsible. Guests at the dinner are the guests of all the members and it is the responsibility of all those present to see that the guests are entertained.

Announcements

7. The announcement of a Mess dinner or formal Mess ball can be made, by memorandum, notices on the website or social media, or in a social calendar.
8. The Chairman's and Committee will appoint the following;
 - a. PMC (President of the Mess Committee) will be responsible for the arrangements for the Dinner and conduct the dinner
 - b. Vice-PMC to assist the PMC with arrangements.
 - c. Mess Steward responsible for the arrangements for the Dinner and conduct the dinner, assisting the PMC in controlling the pace of the dinner or other small tasks as assigned.
 - d. MC (Master of Ceremonies) to make and control the pace of announcements, speeches and proceedings.
 - e. TM (Toast Master) to make the various Toasts as applicable.
 - f. Sargent at Arms
 - g. Fines Master

Dress

9. The dress for Mess dinners and formal Mess dinners will be Mess dress or equivalent. Members who do not possess Mess dress and guests will wear evening dress ("black tie" / tuxedo), female guests to wear formal evening dress.

Assembly

10. The time of a function will always be given (e.g. "18:30 for 19:00 hrs" or "19:00 for 19:30 hrs"). The members and guests are required to be there on time. There is no such thing as being sociably late. Members and guests are required to be there at 18:30 hrs. This event gathering is to enable members to meet and entertain guests, have a pre-dinner drink, and ascertain their position at the table from the seating plan that will be placed in the lounge or at the entrance to the dining room where every member can see it.
11. The Mess Steward will inform the PMC when dinner is ready. If the Chairman's and guests appear to be ready, the PMC shall, pass word to the bugler or piper (if in attendance) to play "Mess Call." Mess calls will normally be given 15 minutes and five minutes before entering the dining room. This allows members time to finish drinks and/or visit the facilities before dinner.
12. The PMC and Chairman's will lead the assembly into the dining room, escorting the senior guests to the head table, or their assigned tables.
The procession will be as follows;
 - a. Standard Barer
 - b. PMC
 - c. Sargent at Arms (Marshall)
 - d. Chairman's
 - e. President /s
 - f. Guest of Honour / VIP's / Special Guests
 - g. Chaplin
 - h. Vice-PMCThe senior guest of honour will sit at the right-hand side of the Chairman/s, with the next senior guest of honour to the seat on his left-hand side.
The remainder will proceed directly to the dining room to their places as designated in the seating plan.

Seating Plan

13. All members except honoured guests should look over the seating plan, usually posted near the dining room, and make sure they know where they are seated well before the move to the dining room is made. Each member should pay particular attention to the person who is seated on their right. As a general rule, members should entertain the guest on your right prior to going into dinner and see that he finds his seat. Similarly, you should entertain this person during the dinner. At a "Mess Ball / Dining In," where the members and their partners are present, each member should escort their partner to their chair and assist them in taking their seat.
14. Members and guests shall stand behind their chairs. The Mess Steward reports, sotto voce, to the PMC that "all members and guests are present, Sir". At this time, the PMC raps the gavel once for silence, and will request that the Chaplin, the VPMC or another person say Grace. Being asked to say Grace should not be a surprise, and a member requested to do so should confirm the appropriateness of their intended Grace with the PMC before the dinner.

Place Cards

15. Before each place setting at the Mess table will be a small card displaying the members' name. This is provided as an aide to finding one's seat. Some place cards are very simple, of white card stock with typewritten names, others may be more ornate.
16. Place cards have another role. They are often used to pass a note down the table, ostensibly to the PMC, though any note passed along the table may be read, or shanghaied by the intervening members. (Notes of import which must reach the PMC are best sent via the Mess Steward.) In any case, the presumption made on receiving any such note is that it originated with the officer whose place card it originally was. It is for this reason that members may see others at the dinner immediately pocket their own place cards, a cautionary act often carried out by those who have a history of employing others' cards to send less than complimentary messages.

Regimental Silver and Trophies

17. Memorabilia or trophies may decorate the Mess table. Other items may be placed on the Mess table in recognition of service history. While care should be taken not to crowd the table such that normal discourse is inconvenienced, Mess dinners are an excellent opportunity to display treasured articles seldom available for close examination, for they form part of their history and culture. Care should always be taken to ensure no harm comes to these items, many of which are irreplaceable; as much for their material value as for their sentimental value.

Behaviour at the Mess Table

18. Because the dinner is a formal function, special rules will be observed. No diner may;
 - a. smoke during the meal, even if held in a facility which allows smoking;
 - b. commence a meal before the PMC, who will likely pause until the head table has been served;
 - c. discuss political, religious or other controversial subjects;
 - d. act in a boisterous manner;
 - e. propose a toast;
 - f. talk after the PMC summons attention until he has finished speaking; and
 - g. leave the table during the meal unless permitted to do so by the PMC.
19. Keep in mind that varying levels of decorum may be observed depending on the location of the dinner, the presence of guests, the purpose of the dinner, and a myriad of other reasons. Erring on the side of caution is always best, despite being regaled with tales of past dinners. Learning to read the situation and the mood in this regard is as valuable a social grace.
20. At the conclusion of the meal, all china, silverware, place mats, flowers, and glasses, with the exception of the port glass, will be removed from the table. If you failed to finish something because the discourse over dinner was so engaging, surrender it to the waiting staff with grace.

Passing the Port

21. When the table is cleared, the port decanters are placed on the table in front of the PMC, and if required, decanters will also be placed in front of other members. When they are in place, the PMC and V-PMC unstoppers the decanters, charge their glasses, and then pass the decanters to the left. Other members having had decanters placed in front of them, will also fill their glasses and pass the decanters to their left.
Whether the decanter touches the table or not is a matter of Mess custom, there is no standing custom one way or another. Some have affected local custom in this regard, in some cases, such as banging the decanter on the table before passing it.
No one should touch their port until the Loyal Toast (i.e., the toast to Her Majesty, The Queen) has been proposed.
If someone does not drink alcohol due to medical or other reasons, they may drink the Loyal Toast with water.

The Loyal Toast

22. When all glasses are charged, the PMC raps his gavel for silence, then stands and, addressing the VPMC, says, "Mr. Vice, The Queen." The V-PMC then stands and, addressing all present says "Lady's & Gentlemen, The Queen "). All then stand and, if a band is in attendance, one verse of God Save The Queen is played. During the playing of God Save The Queen, the port glasses may be left on the table or held in the right hand at waist level while standing to attention; the custom may vary between elements and units. When the band has stopped playing, all members respond with "The Queen," and drink. All present then sit down and conversation is resumed.
23. The Loyal Toast may be followed by others, such as:
 - a. To other heads of state, and
 - b. To the Guest of Honour, VIP or Special Guests .

Other Toasts

24. **Fallen Comrades.** It has become customary to toast fallen comrades. This may take the form of a simple toast "To Fallen Comrades" requested by the PMC of one of the members present. Alternatively, some Messes set a separate table place setting in honour of the fallen, and when desired, an explanatory description of the place setting and a longer version of a Toast may be presented.
25. **The Ladies.** Traditionally, in Mess Ball / Dinings-In, the ladies (harkening back to a time when all serving officers were male) would also be toasted for their perseverance in support of their soldier-husbands. This custom is still followed, although it may well be a male guest standing with the male officers and toasting his serving partner in the execution of this toast.
26. **The Legion.** Mess Dinners held by the Legion in which present are members of 'a Regiment' by cap badge or by association through service, may include a toast to the Regiment. Often, a senior member of the Regiment is requested to make this toast, and has the freedom to deliver it as he (or she) sees fit, marking the connection between the Regiment of the current day with its past.

Following the Toast(s)

27. Following the toast(s), coffee will be served, and in the increasingly rare instance that the dining location permits smoking, the PMC gives permission to smoke by lighting a cigarette or by passing a cigarette to a neighbour. Waiters will place ashtrays on the table, followed by the serving of liqueurs.
28. During coffee, the PMC will ask the Mess Steward to bring forward the chief cook; He will introduce him/her to the senior guest and the Mess Manager will bring a chair to be placed behind and between them for the Chief Cook. The PMC will invite the Chief Cook to have a drink. A steward will bring the drinks on a tray. After their drink, the Chief Cook asks permission to retire, and the extra chair is removed. As the cook is concluding his visit with the CO, the Mess Steward will normally bring the remainder of the kitchen or catering staff into the dining room, the assembly will express their gratitude for the kitchen and serving staff's efforts with a round of applause.

Speeches

29. Should there be any speeches, they follow at this point. In some Messes, speeches or presentations may be done before the dinner, specifically to keep them brief as well as to avoid prolonging time spent at the table following the meal. The PMC will get everyone's attention by rapping the gavel three times and will call upon the Chairman's to speak if they desire to do so. Indication that a dinner is officially over will normally be given by the PMC standing up until noticed by all members.

After Dinner Entertainment

30. **Raffle / Auction / Fines.** At this point or earlier in the proceedings time may be set aside for raffling off gifts, an auction and the fines to be read out by the Fines Master and paid-up.
31. **Dance.** Following the dinner, all members and guests may then begin with the dance, this is considered the best part of the evening.
32. **Retire.** Following the dinner, the members may retire to the lounge. A program of entertainment or games may follow the dinner depending on custom. This is the most relaxed part of the evening, affording an opportunity for all members to become better acquainted. Members should not leave the mess until after the Chairman's and guests have departed. If a member has reason to leave before the CO, he should first pay his respects to the CO, but there must be sufficient members remaining to ensure the entertainment of guests so long as any remain. Paying your respects merely means saying "Good Night" to the PMC and Chairman's.

Tradition

33. It is reiterated that tradition may produce minor variations in procedure for Mess dinners, but the overall purpose and the formality of a Mess dinner will always remain.

- A typical table setting for a three-course meal (soup, salad, entrée, dessert).
- The glasses, in order from right to left are for ice water, white wine, red wine and port.
- To the front left of the port glass is a white china mug for the drinking of a toast.



Table Manners for Formal and Informal Dinners

34. If you look at eating as a maintenance function then you may feel that the mechanics of the function itself is a secondary nature. Good food is rendered much better when one has good silver, tableware, crystal, fine wine and enjoyable company. An oaf who eats with his mouth open, knows little, and cares less about how to handle the instruments before him can ruin this atmosphere. He is not only an embarrassment to his fellow member; he puts you off your food.
35. A Mess Dinner is not supposed to take on the appearance of a meeting or a knife fight. The food on your plate is already dead; you are not required to kill it. Nor is the consumption of each course a race. The only prize you are likely to get for finishing first is gas.
36. Still, the matter of eating in public is more important to a member than many realize. You can very easily embarrass not only yourself but also your fellow members, the Chairman's or Guests.

Conversation

37. The well-bred person is careful not to speak with food in his mouth, or gesticulate with utensils in his hand. The conversation should be tactful, kind, responsive, brief, and cheerful. Unpleasant topics should be avoided; to imitate anyone is ill mannered. Controversial topics such as religion, politics or the opposite sex should, by common consent, be avoided.

38. Do not ignore guests after dinner. Also, do not take it as your personal crusade to monopolize the conversation in order to tell them the shortcomings. It is disrespectful, rude, unprofessional, and the height of ignorance.
39. Traditionally, members were expected to remain at the table throughout the meal, regardless of duration and the possible effects of consuming wines with each course. If time permits, a note passed to the PMC via the Mess Sergeant requesting permission to leave the table should be proffered. In any case, the immature taunts of others for summarily leaving the table remains preferable to the potentially more embarrassing results of 'toughing it out.'