

Ch. 37 Social Eating

[You can adapt for the holidays...]

You have a goal in mind: to be so mindful about your eating behavior that your weight will remain where you want it, or to drop a bit. You've been paying attention to your hunger & fullness signals, waiting to eat until you're hungry and stopping before you're full. And you've been very careful to set up your life so that temptations are reduced and mindful behaviors are easier.

But then comes the HOLIDAYS! And an invitation—a fancy dinner, a cocktail party, a buffet. Ack!! You want to appear polite, engaged, and appreciative, but worry that maintaining the Winning Formula will be difficult. Maybe the invitation involves people you don't know too well—new neighbors, a potential client, or your boss. Maybe it's from your in-laws or grandmother. What to do?

Mental preparation is essential, which means first considering your purpose in attending and the outcome you desire as a result of being there. Here's one trick I use to set myself up for success in a variety of situations that might be challenging: I ask myself how my *future self—the self I'll be tomorrow or some time down the road*—would like to see the situation played out as I look back. And then I imagine how I could make that happen. Each scenario below requires a slightly different approach, but they all start with purpose and intention.

The Dinner Party

What is your purpose in attending? Is it to get into or stay in your host's good graces? Do you hope to know the other guests better, to discover common ground? You don't have to clean your plate with enthusiasm to prove you're a worthy guest. If you're shy and would rather not attract attention to yourself, focus on the other person(s). When you ask open-ended questions and listen carefully to what they say, the focus is off you (and what you are *not* eating), and it makes them feel special. Win-Win.

What eating behaviors seem most risky in this situation? Will the second glass of wine lower your resistance to accepting seconds? If you leave some food on your plate, do you fear your host's feelings will be hurt? Will you lose track of your hunger levels if the meal goes on and on?

How will you be polite? If you're pressed to eat more, how will you shut down your inner **Martyr**? What phrases will you use to explain your behaviors? The people most likely to press you are family members and good friends “who knew you when” you were a bottomless pit. *You do not need to apologize for eating less. “True thins” never do.* No explanation is needed beyond, “It was delicious. I have no space left for another bite.”

Practice your “out.” Whatever statement you decide to use as your out, repeat it to yourself several times with conviction. You may never need it, but repetition will serve to strengthen your inner resolve.



The Cocktail or Networking Party

Prepare yourself ahead of time as above by setting your intention for the event. If alcoholic beverages are involved, understand how your inhibitions are reduced after one drink (after two?). It's best to stay away from the bar and shake your head no when the tasty hors d'oeuvres come around for the second or third time. Remember, you're there to connect with other people.

After I donned my scientific observer hat, I discovered that I'd been using my wine glass and snack plate as introvert crutches. Whenever I felt uncomfortable, I would take a sip from my glass or wave it around, or refill my plate and say something obvious about the appetizer, the food version of "How 'bout them Yankees!" This was a poor strategy for connecting more deeply with other guests.

Instead, I decided to spend the first 30 to 60 minutes empty-handed—no glass, no plate—so I could focus my full attention on the person or people I was talking to. When I stopped worrying about making a good impression and instead tried to get to know what got the person up in the morning, we both had a more rewarding interaction. [Insider tip #1: Other people worry about making a good impression on *you*, so forget about yourself and focus on them. They will think you're brilliant.]

The Bottomless Buffet or Perfect Potluck

In this instance, your intention might have an additional twist—you want to taste new foods or enjoy old favorites you'd never make for yourself. The buffet is full of Teasers. It brings out our FOMO (Fear of Missing Out)—we want to try *everything*.

Envision the serving table, laden with all sorts of foods—so many dishes, so little stomach space! Some foods will be old standbys—on the appetizer end: raw veggies with hummus dip, crackers, cheeses, and cold cuts—on the dessert end: brownies, lemon bars, and chocolate chip cookies. But wait! You may also find dishes you don't recognize or haven't enjoyed in a long time.

What will be your strategy? Will you go for old favorites or new tastes? Eat dessert first? Only salads? Just one bite of each and every dish? How will you deal with a big helping of something that looked delicious on the platter but turns out to be *meh*? How will you handle your concern that everyone's watching and thinking, "No wonder she weighs so much! Look at the pile on her plate!" [Insider tip #2: Most people are thinking about what's on their own plates, not what's on yours.]


The line forms to the left. Already you can smell the delicious temptations ahead. Do not charge into the line, napkin under your chin. Wait until it has thinned, because you are going to take your own sweet time choosing what to put on your plate.

Before you pick up a plate, walk the entire length of the table and scope out the scene. What is familiar and what's new? What intrigues you? If you'd envisioned eating dessert first or only eating salads, does the dessert or salad plan still look viable?

Now get your plate and go down the line again, serving yourself *small amounts* of what you mentally chose. It's OK to choose nothing but desserts. If a food turns out to be super delicious, you can always go back for more. And if it's disappointing, don't feel bad about leaving it on the plate or slipping it into the trash. A "true thin" would do that without a second thought.

Find a seat and do your best to set aside expectations from prior experience with each food sample. Focus on the taste and texture in your mouth *at this moment*. Can you discern the ingredients? What makes it pleasing or not so pleasing? Is it worth eating or should you move on to the next sample?

As soon as you feel sufficiently fed, toss your plate and *step away from the food trough*.

 **Prompt: Do a postmortem.** Whatever kind of party it was, when you get back home, review the event and make notes in your notebook. Acknowledge yourself for every little thing that went well. If you were less than pleased with some of your behaviors, you did not fail, you just got new information. Ask yourself how might you do better next time?

REMEMBER THIS

Prepare by setting a clear intention and strategy for the event *ahead of time*.

Ask yourself, "WWTTD?"—What Would a "True Thin" Do?

Any setback is a powerful opportunity for learning.