

THE ALBUQUERQUE TRIBUNE
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Now boorish businessman can learn to seal the deal

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Legend has it the Japanese planned their city streets in strategically confusing ways to baffle invaders.

Apparently, the planners of the posh Santa Fe subdivision Las Campanas had the same idea. Try finding the clubhouse without getting lost. But the payoff makes the trip worthwhile: an impressive art collection and expansive views of golf courses on lush, rolling hills.

And then there's the fine restaurant. But watch your step if Thelma Domenici is there. Domenici is teaching corporate decorum classes on etiquette and poise to business people. The idea, she says, is to bring a higher level of class to New Mexico's movers and shakers.

And she invited me. Go figure.

The evening started out nice enough, though I knew beforehand it wouldn't be easy. Domenici explained that the hors d'oeuvres and the dinner items were chosen for their difficulty to eat.

No problem. I wasn't raised in a barn.

Plus, I'd sat through part of a course Domenici teaches at the University of New Mexico, Social Survival 101, that steeps UNM students in etiquette.

Luckily, Domenici didn't score the Las Campanas event. Sorry Mom, I would have failed.

The class included 25 managers and business and commercial bankers from Wells Fargo Bank of Santa Fe - a group I wasn't keen on embarrassing myself in front of.

We gathered around a table for small talk, and most of us seemed optimistic about what was ahead.

Kathy Kiel said she hoped to re-learn the little things she'd forgotten, like what to do with a knife after it was used with a salad.

My difficulties began with the cocktail snacks. The waitstaff passed around honey-glazed chicken on kabob skewers. I took one and nibbled on the stick, and stabbed the roof of my mouth. I wasn't sure what to do with the stick.

Most of us were stumped.

I handed it to the bartender.

Domenici later explained we should have used plates. Well, duh.

Things went from bad to worse.

In fact, nearly everything I did during cocktail hour was wrong.

Domenici later explained my faux pas:

I had my hands in my pockets. I should have had them at my side.

I held my glass in my right hand. When I shook hands with someone, I had to switch hands, presenting my new acquaintance with a clammy, damp hand. Oops.

Things went better at dinner, until the bread was passed.

I grabbed a slice, buttered it and passed the loaf. I learned that bread should be buttered one bite at a time, not as a slice.

I felt like the slow kid in class.

My confidence faded even more as Domenici, the classy former CEO of a huge Arizona health-care company and sister of you-know-who, explained the finer points of Continental vs. American dining styles. Gulp. I was out of my league.

I even failed the napkin test. It should be placed on your lap with the folded side toward you, so you can dab your mouth easily. I discretely turned mine around.

When the veal chop with potatoes and greens arrived, my heart sank. Not that I don't love veal, but the slices had the bone in, arching out of the end like the bow of a harp. Every time I cut into the meat, it flopped left and right on the plate, splashing juices all over the white starched table cloth.

Only teeny-tiny bites averted disaster.

At this point, I was happy just to avoid talking with food in my mouth.

Domenici took questions during dinner. She told Kiel that a knife used for salad should be placed on the butter plate, or ask for a new knife when the salad plate is cleared.

Regarding dietary concerns, if you need a vegetarian or other special meal, bring it up with the hostess when you RSVP. But don't expect her to bend over backward if the request is really odd.

And if the food is bad in a restaurant or at a function, there are discreet ways to tell the waitstaff. Don't shout it across the room, Domenici says.

By the time desert came - a chocolate soufflé - most of us knew not to scoop and dig into the pastry. This wasn't Shoney's.

I felt like an etiquette dud when all was said and done. But the Wells Fargo folks said they felt more confident.

"I thought it was useful," said Thomas Lanteri, a business banker. "There were things that I do encounter that I can use the minute I get out, like at the Rotary club."

Most said they go to after-hours networking events and meetings where you don't want to embarrass yourself.

"My primary goal was that they feel comfortable and have the tools to do it all," said Michelle Coontz, president of Wells Fargo Bank of Santa Fe. "In Santa Fe you go from one extreme to another. You run into that '60s person who wants to drop out of the world, and at the same time you see powerful CEOs. I want them to feel confident in all situations. It's all to make your client feel comfortable."