

The Ladies Who Lunch

Stephanie Cooperman, 09.18.06



For the dainty darlings attending Lyudmila Bloch's finishing school, it's no spit and all polish.

Rule #1 when meeting someone new: Don't be late. Or only five minutes late. Maybe ten if you blame transportation. Fifteen, tops, if you can feign illness. On a recent Monday afternoon, I am running down Broadway to meet not just anyone new, but Lyudmila Bloch--New York City's queen of etiquette. I'm 16 minutes late, and I have only my shoes to blame: four-inch heels I have chosen especially for the occasion. In my opinion, etiquette, like all things you're supposed to learn, should be a little painful.

As I limp into the lobby of the Michelangelo Hotel on 51st Street, I hear the piped-in sounds of Vivaldi's "Spring" and immediately begin to panic. I am about to meet an etiquette teacher and have tea, a beverage I usually consume out of a Snapple bottle. Bloch, 48, is already sitting on a pale green couch, legs crossed, teacup in hand. She is all pearls and smiles, exuding a fluid exactness even as she shakes off my apologies in her slight Russian accent and hands me a menu.

"I'm forever amazed how many interesting questions there are about tea," she says. "We could spend the whole day talking about it."

Bloch is wearing sensible shoes and a crisp black suit. A trained linguist, she's traveled the world and landed in Manhattan, where in 2000 she developed the Young Ambassadors program at The Plaza Hotel to teach etiquette, cooking and other skills to the children of visiting families. The program was so popular that it spawned a series of business-etiquette and leadership classes, a book, and later, a pilot program in New York City public schools. When The Plaza closed, Bloch continued her work as a private consultant for children, teens and adults. But in a world where no one even has time to use capital letters in an e-mail, let alone sit down to a four-course meal, what place does etiquette really have?

"It's beyond forks and knives," Bloch says as she shows me how to hold the teacup correctly, with my index finger through the handle. "It's about self-esteem and accomplishing something. And for the parents, nothing is more important than the reward of having a well-mannered child."

Bloch knows she faces an uphill battle.

"We've become so casual," she says. "That is not a good thing."

Yet there is cause for optimism. After Bloch tells me what I have done wrong--adding the lemon before pouring the tea ("It could splash"), raising the cup without holding the saucer underneath it ("Don't spill"), sticking out my pinky finger ("No, no, no, *never* do that")--she invites me to a birthday party on the Upper East Side to watch the next generation take tea.

Kings' Carriage House, a restaurant on 82nd Street and Second Avenue, looks like a dollhouse. Everything is delicately flawless, from the portraits staring from the crimson walls to the blue-and-white china that screams for finger sandwiches. Walking onto the second floor, I see miniature people dressed in floral dresses, sequined sweaters and shiny white shoes. They are friends of Kendal Sterling, at whose birthday party Bloch will teach 20 first-graders--and their dolls--proper table manners. Kendal, wearing her favorite white dress (acquired on a family trip to Paris), has her hair tied in a tight bun. "It's my eighth birthday," she says, as her mother places a sparkling tiara on her head.

"You have to keep the lesson fun or it won't take," Bloch explains, leading the girls to their seats marked by place cards.

"Ladies, we're going to learn good social skills. I have here the magic etiquette bag," Bloch says, holding up a small pouch. The girls swing their feet, comb their dolls' hair or fiddle with the heart-shaped sugar cube set on a teaspoon above each plate. "Let's pull out a question. Who would like to read the first one?"

Every hand shoots up. In a cross between a game show and English class, Bloch leads them through a battery of manners questions.

"If you don't have a handkerchief, you're in trouble," Bloch says, in response to a question about acceptable places to blow one's nose. "We cannot use the table napkin. And when the food at a friend's house is yummy, when do you ask for seconds?" she asks.

"When everything is in little pieces," says a girl with tight ringlet curls.

"Not quite," Bloch says.

"When everyone is done eating," another girl named Emily says.

"That's right, and only when the hostess asks if anyone would like more," Bloch says. "Now, who can show us how we put the napkin on our laps?"

Kendal comes to the front of the room. "It's easy," she says. "Watch me." She sits perfectly straight, carefully folds the napkin in half and places the creased side close to her waist. She also demonstrates how children should lift the water glass with two hands and look into it, not over it, while drinking. And tea? She and her friends put me to shame. They giggle when the sugar cubes go *ker-plunk* into their raspberry tea, but their tiny hands are quite capable of balancing their cups over their saucers.

Yet it takes some convincing to prove that scones are appetizing.

"They taste just like little muffins," Bloch says.

"They don't *look* like muffins," a girl in a pink dress says to her neighbor.

"Remember not to bite into the scone," Bloch directs. "Break it into small enough pieces to put into your mouth. And spread the jam on your plate, not directly on the scone."

The manners bible, Emily Post's *Etiquette*, divides the subject of "tea" into 17 subcategories. Bloch refers to it, as well as to her other favorites: Suzanne von Drachenfels's *The Art of the Table* and Letitia Baldrige's *New Complete Guide to Executive Manners*. But there aren't many modern tomes from which to choose. "Etiquette books today offer the best advice to get out of a one-night stand," she says. If society has become coarser, Bloch doesn't mind being the proverbial sandpaper. "It takes a tremendous effort to convince people of the value of what I do. But I still have hope people will always be interested in civility. True beauty is when I see people caring about how they treat each other."

In the war on bad manners, Bloch prefers the guerrilla approach, taking pleasure in winning each battle, one tea party at a time. "What topics should we avoid when dining?" she asks.

"Bugs!" yells Kendal.

"Things that are gross!"

"Bad words!"

"Yes, yes, yes. And we never ask how old someone is, if they are married or if they have children, right?" Bloch says.

After a discussion about what happens when something falls to the floor, I see that while Bloch's classes give reason for hope, the verdict is still out on the next generation. "We must wait for a server to pick it up," Bloch says. "And how do we get a server's attention? We make eye contact."

A girl with round glasses, cradling a flaxen-haired doll almost as big as she is, kicks her napkin under the table. A waiter retrieves it.

"Thank you very much," she whispers, wiping her nose.

Lyudmila Bloch teaches tea, basic dining, business and formal etiquette classes. Instruction starts at \$85 for a public class, \$450 for a private class with up to three people and \$4,000 for a group business class. www.etiquetteoutreach.com.

The Rules, According to Ms. Bloch

Helpful tips from *The Golden Rules of Etiquette at The Plaza* (Fifth Avenue Press, 2004), \$17, written and illustrated by Tom Civitano, Lyudmila Bloch and Rosemary Carroll.

Screaming or yelling in public would be considered rude behavior anywhere. Everyone knows there were only two residents who were able to scream and yell in the lobby of The Plaza. The first was Eloise, and the second was Macaulay Culkin when he starred in the movie *Home Alone 2*. Always stand for introductions. Say your name, smile, make eye contact and shake hands.

A gentleman goes ahead of a woman through a revolving door and pushes it for her.

Before you add seasoning to your soup, taste it first, then add salt or pepper. Use small oyster crackers if they're offered with your soup. Don't dip your bread into your soup!

Use your napkin to gently blot your mouth and lips so no one will think that you just took a time-shuttle from the Middle Ages.