



## TABLE TALK

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NEW YORK-BASED HOSPITALITY CONSULTANT ARLENE SPIEGEL SPILLS THE BEANS ON HOW TO LAY A REALLY GREAT TABLE.

Perhaps because we have been setting them all our lives, very few of us give a lot of thought to the art of table design. But Arlene Spiegel knows that tabletops are a prime opportunity to create brand, set expectations and please guests.

### **How important is the tablescape in the overall restaurant experience?**

Along with the street window and menu, I call the tabletop the 'high rent district' in a restaurant. It is one of the most valuable spaces because everyone gathers around it and here you have got everyone's attention. Here, you can really set the stage and tell people what you are all about.

### **Beyond being pretty and functional?**

A tablescape needs to tell a story, and the story needs to reinforce the expectation of the total dining experience you are about to have. Is the table setting playful? Or artsy and edgy? The diners are going to expect these qualities in the food they are about to eat.

### **How do you set the scene?**

It could be an oversized pepper mill, or colourful place mats. The key to a tablescape is that it should represent the way you want your guests to feel. Do you want them to feel excited? Do you want them to feel luxurious? It's about capturing the DNA of the overall brand.

### **In the old days spaces between place settings were measured with a stick...**

I believe that any sit-down restaurant has to have a standard in their table setting. The tablescape needs to be uniform throughout the restaurant, because that really shows professionalism. Whether this is done with a paper napkin or the finest linen, it lets guests know that they are cared about, they are about to be taken care of to a high standard.

### **What are the simple tricks a restaurant manager should know about?**

Even in a very relaxed casual restaurant, you should use linen napkins. The weight of the silverware also tells a story. If you serve home cooking then the silverware should match that. If you are ultramodern, your silverware should have a very slim, contemporary design. The other thing I really like to see in a somewhat casual restaurant is a great bottle of olive oil on the table. Either with an in-house label or from a local orchard that celebrates something. The message is that you are using high-quality ingredients. I also like pepper and salt mills; they provide architectural balance at the centre of the table.

### **What about in more formal restaurants?**

In European fine dining restaurants, there is always a charger plate that is put down. It sets the tone. It could be china with the restaurant's or hotel's logo on it, or it could be made out of steel or copper or brass. It really does mark your place and makes you feel very comfortable.

### **Who are your preferred tableware providers?**

Based on formality and functionality I like Riedel; it has a beautiful line. For casual I go with Arcoroc. For great durability and style, I very much like Steelite. And I still go back to my old Rosenthal – you can't beat it.