

# Dining Etiquette

*How to interview over a meal (or eat properly during any nice meal!)*

# GENERAL INFORMATION

## **Remember the purpose of the meal.**

Especially when your meal is a part of an interview, it is important to remember your reason for being there. Focus on:

- Making a good impression
- Getting to know your interviewers
- Answering questions
- Don't focus on "getting full", or on the quality of the food. It's all about the interview.

# Q: Why are lunch and dinner interviews important?

- Employers may want to observe you in a more social situation to see how you conduct yourself, how you visit, and how you interact.
- Employers are also interested in how you interact with the wait staff. Remember to say “please” and “thank you”, and to be polite to them as well!
- Interviews that last for several hours may extend through mealtimes.

# Q: How do I eat and answer questions at the same time?

- By taking very small bites, so you can quickly finish and swallow the bite before speaking.
- You may not have much time to eat; remember that the main point of the meal is to interact. Eating is secondary.

The background of the image is a dark blue, semi-transparent overlay of the official seal of the University of California. The seal features a central shield with a book and a star, surrounded by a circular border with the text "UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA" and "1868".

AS YOU SIT DOWN

# Q: Who should sit down first?

- You should wait for your interviewer/host to invite you to sit down before taking your seat.
- Of course, they might not know this rule, so if they just sit down, you can do the same 😊

# Q: What should I do with my napkin?

- As soon as everyone is seated, unfold your napkin and place it across your lap, folded, with the fold toward you.
- During the meal, remember not to use the napkin as a tissue.

# Q: Is it okay to sit with my legs crossed?

- No. Sit up straight and keep your feet flat on the floor (women can cross their ankles).
- Crossing your legs during the meal can cause you to slouch, and looks too casual.



# Q: When is it okay to begin drinking and eating?

- After everyone is seated and you have placed your napkin in your lap, it is appropriate to sip your water.
- For other beverages and foods, wait until everyone has been served, and do not eat until your host has begun.

The background of the slide is a dark blue, semi-transparent seal of the University of Cambridge. The seal features a central shield with four lions, surrounded by a circular border containing the Latin motto 'CAMBRIDGE' at the top and '1209' at the bottom. The text 'THE LAYOUT' is centered in white, bold, sans-serif font.

# THE LAYOUT

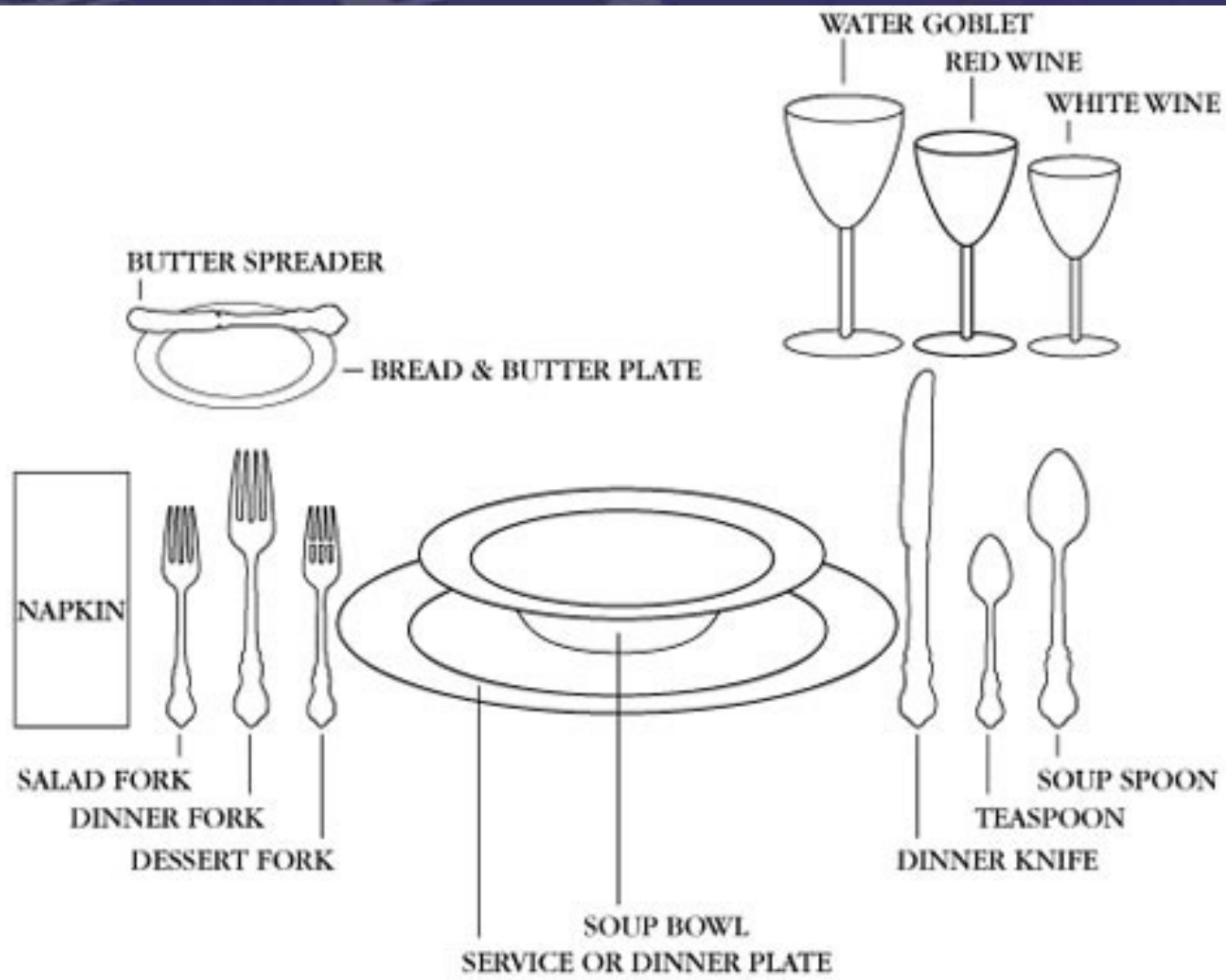


**Q: Which salad plate, bread and butter plate, and drinks are mine?**

- Your salad plate and bread and butter plate are on your left, above your fork.
- Your beverages are on the right above your spoon.

# Q: Which utensil is for what?

- The soup spoon is on your outermost right, followed by your beverage spoon, salad knife and dinner knife.
- If you have two forks, the outside fork is for salad and the fork closest to the plate is for your main course.
- Use your silverware from the outside in.
- After you use a piece of silverware, never place it back on the table.
- Any unused silverware is left on the table.



The background of the image is a dark blue gradient with a large, faint watermark of the University of California seal. The seal features a central shield with a book and a star, surrounded by a circular border with the text "UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA" and "1868".

# BEVERAGES

# Q: What should I order to drink?

- Water, juice, and iced tea are safe choices. It is best not to order alcohol even if the interviewer does.

# Q: Is it rude or wrong to use multiple packets of sugar/sweetener in tea or coffee?

- Limit yourself to one or two packets of sugar.
- Tear one or both at the same time  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way at the top of the packet, and leave waste at the side of the plate.



The background of the image is a dark blue, semi-transparent overlay of the official seal of the University of California, Berkeley. The seal features a central shield with a book and a star, surrounded by a circular border with the text "UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA" and "1868".

BREAD AND STUFF

# Q: How should I pass things like the bread basket, butter and salad dressings?

- The person closest takes the service plate/basket. Offer some to the person to your left, then serve yourself, and then pass to the person on your right.
- Foods should go from the service plate to your plate, never to your mouth. Butter should be placed on your bread and butter plate, not directly on your bread.

**Q: Is it okay to spread butter on my entire roll at one time?**

- No. Break off a bite-sized piece of your roll, butter it and eat it, one bite at a time.

The background of the slide is a dark blue, semi-transparent seal of the University of California. The seal features a central shield with a book, a star, and a sun, surrounded by the text "UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA" and "1868".

# ORDERING FOOD

**In general, the employer will suggest that *your* order be taken first (his or her order will be taken last).**

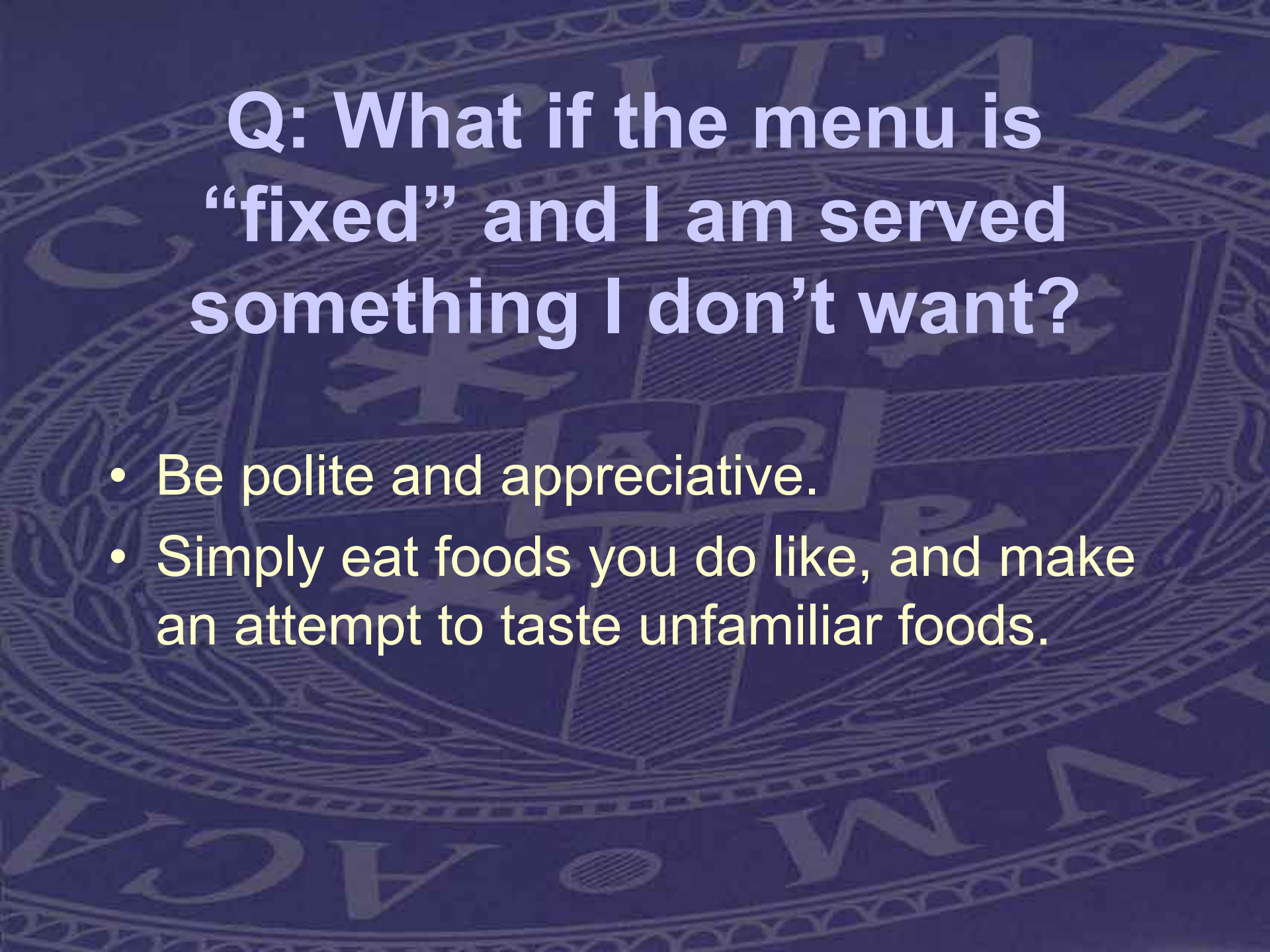
# Q: What is appropriate to order for dinner?

- Choose simple foods that are easily eaten with a fork and knife
- Don't order one of the most expensive items on the menu or more than two courses *unless your host specifically recommends it.*



**Q: Is it best to avoid ordering a food if I can't pronounce its name?**

- No. If you'd like it, ask the server to describe the food, and point to it on the menu.



**Q: What if the menu is  
“fixed” and I am served  
something I don’t want?**

- Be polite and appreciative.
- Simply eat foods you do like, and make an attempt to taste unfamiliar foods.



SOUP



# Q: How should soup be consumed?

- Dip your spoon *away* from yourself to fill your spoon with soup.
- Rest your spoon periodically on the service plate behind the bowl.
- Sip quietly. No slurping or other loud noises (true for all foods!)

# Q: Is it rude to season my food before tasting it?

- Yes. You should *not* salt and pepper your food before tasting it. Interviewers might assume from this behavior that you often take action without checking relevant information first.
- Try a bite first, then season if necessary. Don't “over season”.

The background of the slide features a large, faint watermark of the University of Cambridge seal. The seal is circular and contains a shield with a cross and four lions. The text "UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE" is visible around the perimeter of the seal, and "CAPITAL" is visible at the top. The entire background is a dark blue color.

# POSSIBLE PROBLEMS

# Q: What if I am served the wrong food, or it is not prepared the way I ordered it?

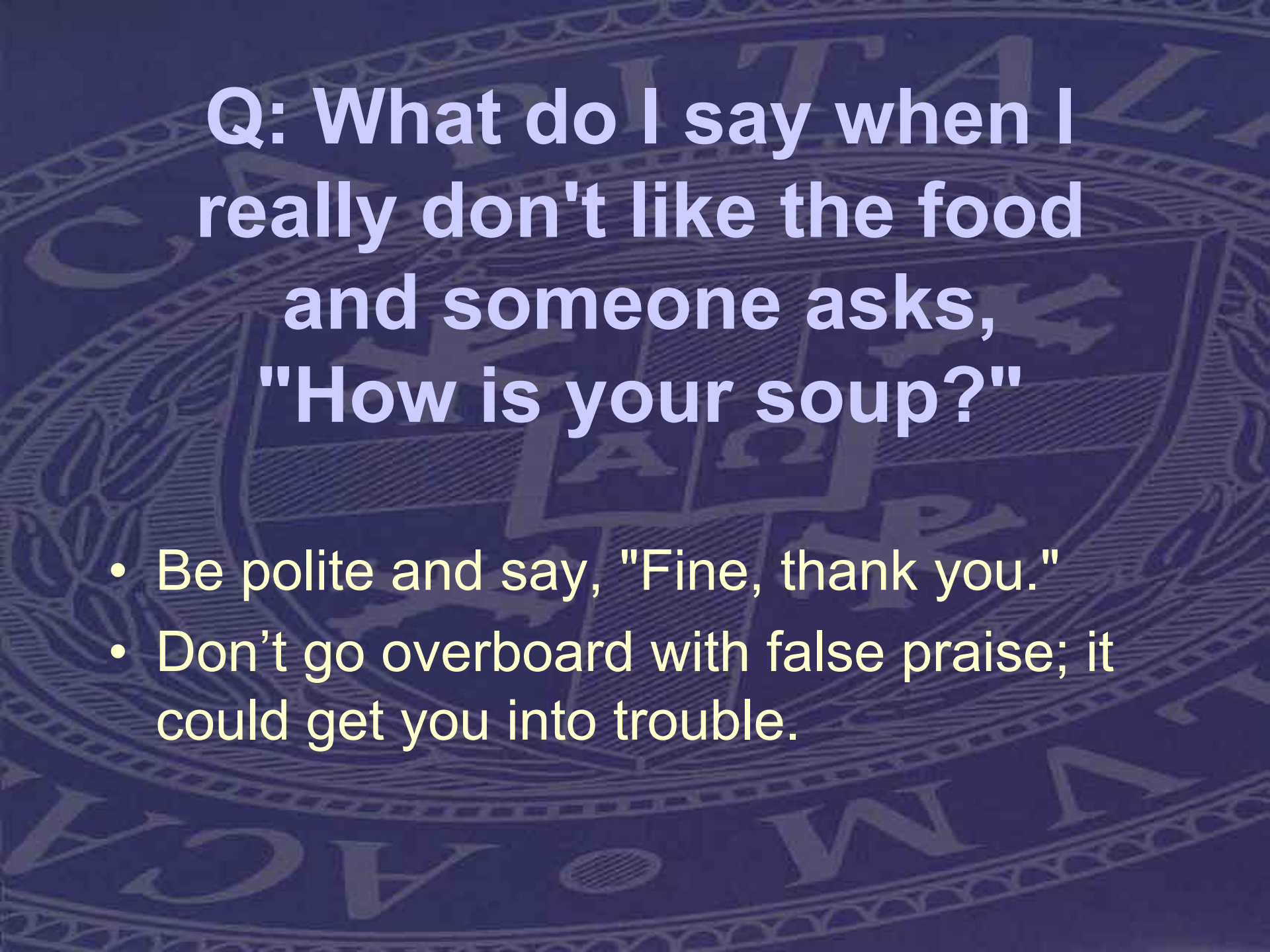
- If it's a major mistake, you can discreetly mention this to the server immediately so that it can be corrected.
- If the error is small, ignore it.
- Fussing over food can make you look childish and finicky (not assets in a job candidate).

# Q: What should I do if my food is cold or doesn't taste good?

- If your food needs to be warmer but is not unbearable, you should just eat it and not call the server over.
- If it is not edible, politely call the server over and explain.

# Q: What if I'm a slow eater?

- In general, you should finish at about the time everyone else is finished.
- If you are not “keeping up” with the pace of others, you can indicate that you are finished so that you don't hold up the remaining courses.



**Q: What do I say when I really don't like the food and someone asks, "How is your soup?"**

- Be polite and say, "Fine, thank you."
- Don't go overboard with false praise; it could get you into trouble.

The image features a dark blue background with a faint, embossed seal of the University of California. The seal is circular and contains a central shield with a cross and four smaller crosses in the quadrants. The shield is surrounded by a laurel wreath. The words "UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA" are inscribed around the perimeter of the seal. Overlaid on the center of the seal is the word "SALAD" in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

SALAD





**Q: Is it okay to cut my salad if the lettuce pieces are too large?**

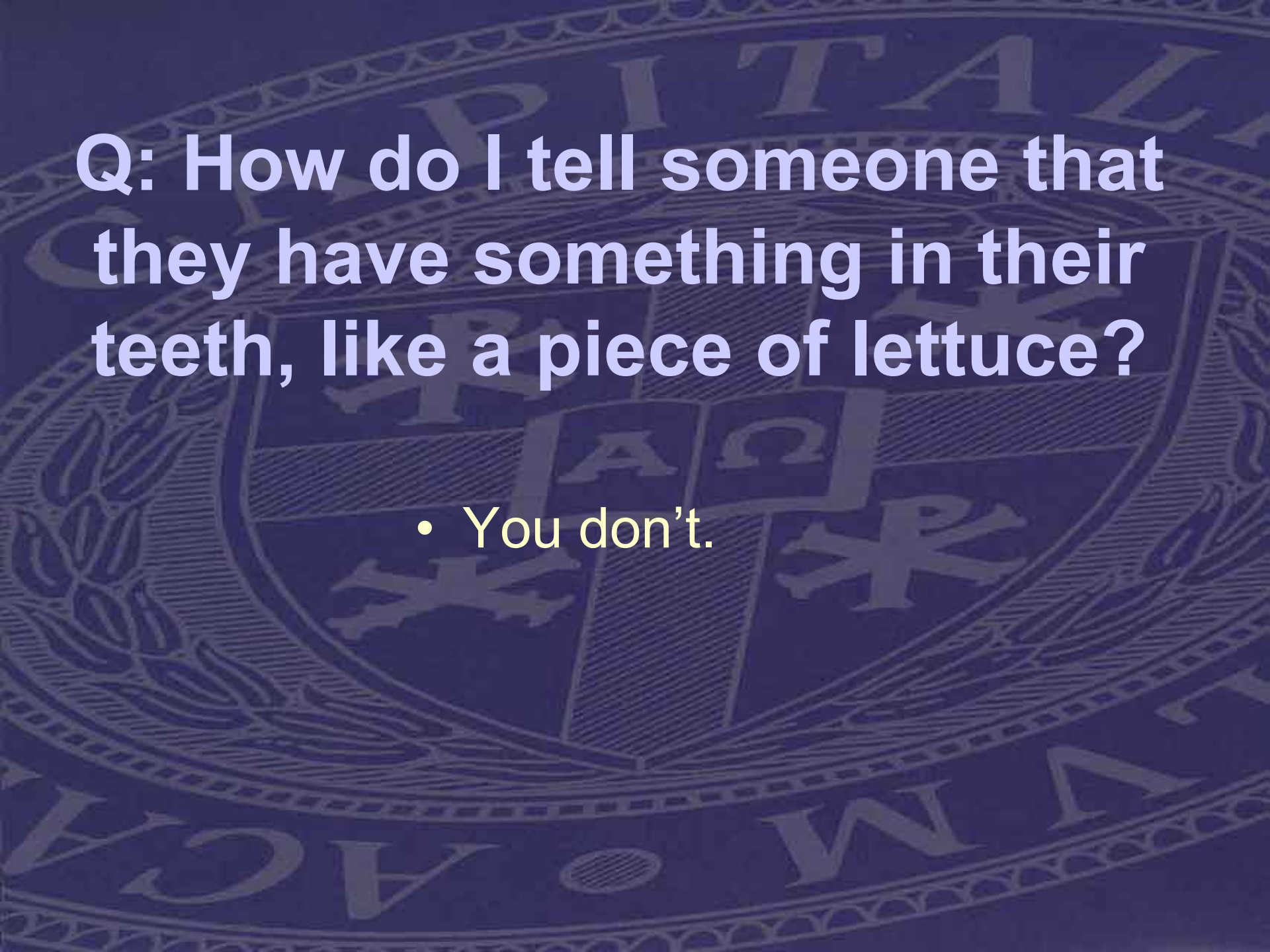
- Yes. Cut a few small bites at a time.

The background of the slide is a dark blue gradient with a large, faint watermark of the University of Cambridge seal. The seal features a shield with a cross and four lions, surrounded by a circular border containing the Latin motto 'SIGILLUM UNIVERSITATIS CAMBRIGIÆ' and the word 'CAPITAL' at the top.

# POSSIBLE PROBLEMS

**Q: How do I avoid eating a certain food? (For example, onions on a salad)**

- Discreetly eat around the food and/or move it carefully to the side of the plate or bowl.
- Don't make a fuss, and don't remove it from the plate.

The background of the slide features a large, semi-transparent watermark of the University of Toronto seal. The seal is circular and contains a central shield with various symbols, including a book and a cross. The words "UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO" are visible around the perimeter of the seal.

**Q: How do I tell someone that they have something in their teeth, like a piece of lettuce?**

- You don't.

# Q: What if I get something stuck in *my* teeth?

- Try to discretely remove the lodged item with your tongue. If this does not work, excuse yourself from the table and go to the restroom.
- Toothpicks should be used discretely and in private; never at the table.

# Q: What if there is a hair (or something else) in the food?

- You have a few choices if you find hair in the food. You can discreetly remove it, eat around it, or politely ask the server to bring you another plate.
- In any case, don't cause a scene and don't spoil the appetites of others.

**Q: What do I do when I don't want to swallow something I already have in my mouth (like an olive pit)?**

- If it went in with your fork, it should usually come out with your fork (and likewise with your spoon or hands). Remove it unobtrusively with your utensil or napkin.

The background of the image is a dark blue, semi-transparent seal of the University of Cambridge. The seal features a central shield with four lions, surrounded by a circular border containing the Latin motto 'CAMBRIDGE' at the top and 'UNIVERSITY' at the bottom. The text 'THE MAIN COURSE' is overlaid in the center in a white, bold, sans-serif font.

# THE MAIN COURSE



# Q: Is there a correct way to use the fork and knife?

There are two main ways to use a fork and knife to cut and eat your food. Either style is considered appropriate.

- *American style*: Cut, then set the knife down and switch the fork to the other hand before eating
- *The European or Continental style*: Cut, then keep the fork in the same hand for eating

# Q: Where do I place the knife when I am eating?

- Put the knife across the top of your plate when you are not using it, blade facing toward you.

# Q: How do I wipe my mouth with the napkin?

- Discreetly dab or wipe your mouth. Replace the napkin on your lap loosely folded, not wadded.

The background of the slide features a large, faint watermark of the University of Toronto seal. The seal is circular and contains the text "UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO" around the perimeter. In the center, there is a shield with a cross and a book, and the motto "ANNO DOMINI 1827" is visible at the bottom.

**Q: Should I go out of my way to use utensils when I am eating finger food?**

- When in doubt, eat with a utensil rather than with your fingers, even those foods (like french fries) that you may typically eat by hand.

**Q: Should I always pass the salt with the pepper, even if someone asks for salt only?**

- Yes, always pass the salt and the pepper together.
- Also, it is considered rude to use it first before passing it to the person who asked for it.



**Q: Is it acceptable to apply lipstick at the table?**

- No grooming of any kind should be done at the table. You should excuse yourself for this purpose.

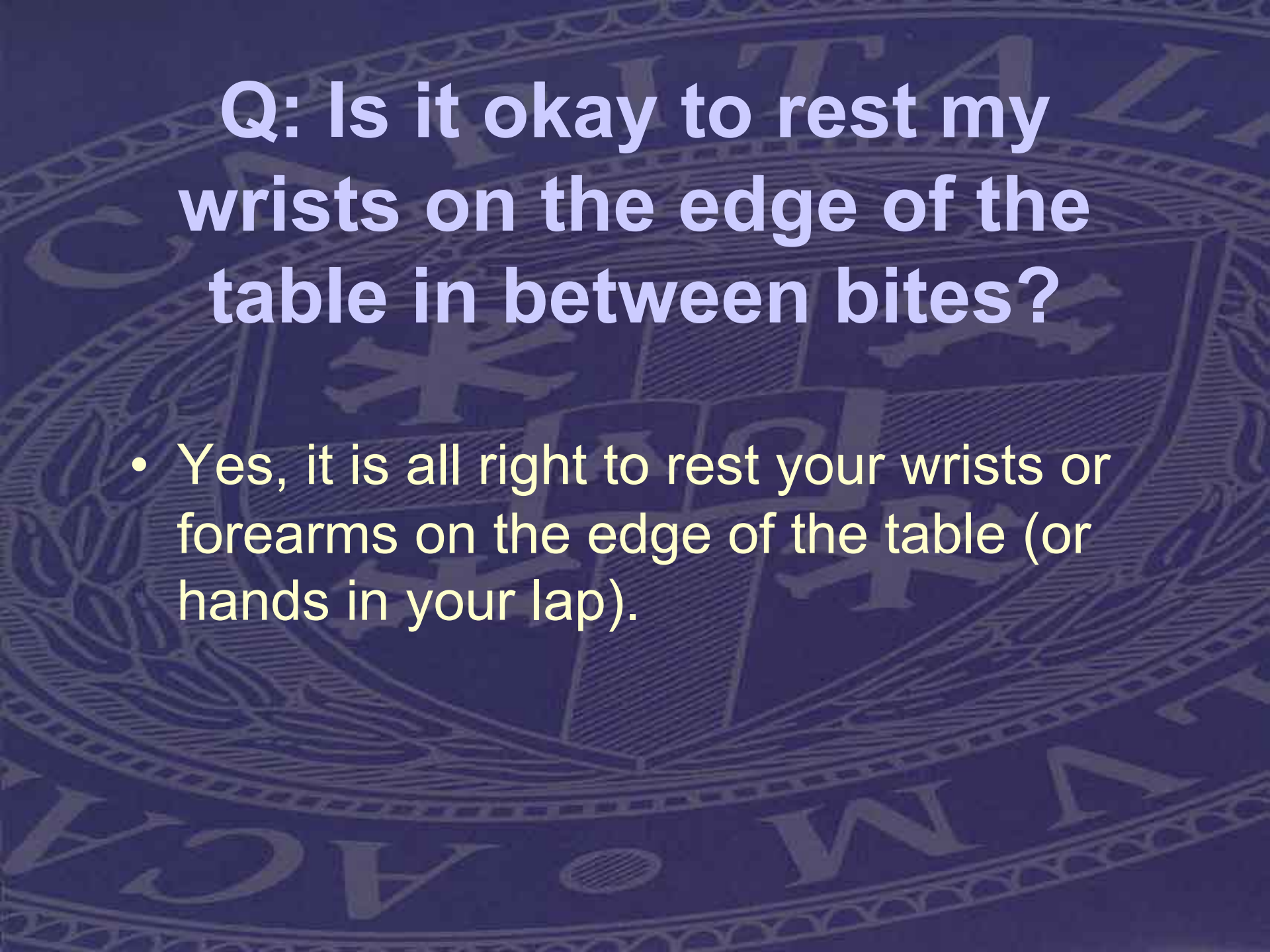
# Q: What is the appropriate way to excuse myself from the table?

- You can excuse yourself from the table by saying, "Excuse me"; do not feel the need to offer an explanation.
- If you leave during the meal, place your napkin on your chair as a signal to your server that you will return.

# Q: Is it ever okay to remove my jacket for heat or other reasons?

- As a general rule, follow the lead of the host before removing your jacket.
- Keep in mind that some restaurants require customers to keep their jackets on during meals.



The background of the slide features a large, semi-transparent watermark of the University of Toronto seal. The seal is circular and contains a shield with a cross, surrounded by the text 'UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO' and '1827'.

**Q: Is it okay to rest my wrists on the edge of the table in between bites?**

- Yes, it is all right to rest your wrists or forearms on the edge of the table (or hands in your lap).

# Q: Should I “clean my plate” in any particular way?

- It is polite to leave some food on your plate. Don't feel the need to be a “clean plater”.
- When finished, don't push away or stack your dishes.
- For interviews and formal dinners, don't ask for a “to-go” box if you have leftovers.

The background of the slide features a large, semi-transparent watermark of the University of California seal. The seal is circular and contains a central shield with a book and a star, surrounded by the text "UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA" and "1868".

# POSSIBLE PROBLEMS

# Q: What if I drop my napkin on the floor?

- If your napkin falls on the floor and it is within easy reach, retrieve it.
- If you are unable to retrieve the napkin without drawing attention to yourself, ask the server for another one.



**Q: What if my dinner fork falls on the floor and I cannot get the server's attention?**

- Never pick up dropped utensils. Wait until you get the server's attention and discreetly ask for a new utensil.

# Q: What if a piece of food falls off my plate?

- If the food falls on the floor, leave it.
- If the food falls on the table and it is a big piece, use your fork and move it to a corner of your plate.

# Q: What should I do if I feel sick during the meal?

- If you really cannot make it through the meal, just excuse yourself and go to the rest room.
- Return when you are feeling better or ask the server to explain that you are not feeling well.



DESSERT



The background of the slide features a large, faint watermark of the University of Cambridge seal. The seal is circular and contains a shield with four quarters, each containing a cross. The shield is surrounded by a laurel wreath. The text "UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE" is visible around the perimeter of the seal.

**Q: How do I eat my dessert?**

- It depends on what you're eating.



# THE END OF THE MEAL

**The host will usually signal the end of the meal by placing his or her napkin on the table.**

## Q: How do I signal I am finished with *my* meal?

- Your silverware should be parallel to each other in the ten and four o'clock position with handles at 4:00. The knife blade points toward you.
- When the meal is over, you should also place your napkin neatly on the table to the right of your dinner plate.
- Leave your plate where it is when you have finished eating.

# Q: What do I do when the check comes?

- Typically in an interview, you are the guest and so the meal is paid for by the employer.
- Remember to thank your host for the meal at its conclusion, and follow up appropriately as you would after any interview.

The background of the slide features a large, faint watermark of the Capital University seal. The seal is circular and contains a shield with a cross, surrounded by the text "CAPITAL UNIVERSITY" and "OHIO".

Need more help?

Compliments of Capital University  
**Career Development**  
**Ohio**