

Meals, interviews make treacherous mix

MBA's learn value of good table manners

By KATHLEEN GRUBB

Associated Press

DAVIS — The suits are sharp, the resumes impressive. What else could a graduate student need to succeed in the cutthroat world of business?

How about table manners?

To make sure they know which fork is which, business students at the University of California at Davis can take an etiquette class through the graduate school of management.

The agenda for this year's seminar promised to teach students how to "dine like a diplomat." But it could have been called, "How to eat a formal meal without disgusting your potential boss."

Good manners may not guarantee a job, but poor manners can hurt an otherwise qualified candidate, said Sacramento etiquette consultant Shirley Wiley during a recent class.

One graduate student with a 3.8 grade point average was a finalist for a marketing job until he was taken on his second interview to a four-star restaurant, she said.

"At the end of the meal, he blew it when he took his thumb

to push rice onto his fork," Wiley said. "At that moment, the interview ended."

San Francisco etiquette consultant Syndi Seid agreed that a meal can make or break a candidate.

"We all know that once you put your elbows on the table, that's it. You can't save it. You can't take it back," Seid said.

The curriculum included such tidbits as the proper way to pass the salt; what to do when you have to sneeze; responding to a question after taking a huge bite of steak; using a fingerbowl; and identifying which knife should be used for fish.

(Answers, according to Seid: with the pepper; excuse yourself from the table; too late, you should have taken a bite small enough to swallow; dipping and drying one hand at a time; and the funny one curved like a Turkish scimitar.)

The class, after a 1½-hour lecture, ended with a "tutorial lunch" where students practiced eating continental style — with knife in the right hand and fork always in the left, tines down.

"This is not the way students eat," said Cathy Tonsing, a second-year student in the masters of business administration program.

"Students don't use silverware, period," said classmate Robin Moore.

Seid hovered over the tables, as 35 students tried to sip their soup without slurping, experimented with chopsticks and practiced toasting the host.

On the art of eating a roll, she said, "Bread is a very sensitive thing. Overall, you're only supposed to take one little piece off the roll, butter it and eat it. This is true of even the hardest sour-dough bread."

Don Blodger, director of student activities, said he will see **ETIQUETTE**, Page B8



Syndi Seid displays eating utensils at her etiquette class. Associated Press

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dent services for the MBA program, said he started the class in 1992 because many candidates for management jobs lost confidence about interviewing over meals.

Blodger said MBA students called back for a second series of interviews with a company frequently face a daylong ordeal that includes both a lunch and a formal dinner.

About 70 percent of students in the Davis MBA program pay

the \$15 fee and invest four hours of time in the class.

Ken Wood, a first-year student, said he learned "the basics" at home but decided a refresher might help. "My mom has always been harping on me that I have the worst manners in the world," he said.

Tonsing said the class she took last spring helped her confidence when she was invited in December to a job interview that included a formal dinner with a bewildering array of tableware.

Apparently, she avoided mistakes.

"I did get the job offer," she said.