

antique·harvest

unique linens and chateau silver

A Brief History of Silverware

The fork, the youngest member of the silverware family, originated in the Orient. It has been on our dinner table only for the last few centuries. The knife's history dates back to the Stone Age, when it was used for hunting as well as for eating. Liquids were drunk by hunters and gatherers who used hollow-shaped natural products, such as shells.

The first man-made spoons were made from wood, bone or horn. Wood was, for the longest time, the material of choice. Knife and spoon were considered personal property and were carried by each diner in a special pouch that was attached to the belt. To eat solid food, people used their fingers or the tip of the knife. During the Middle Ages, in the monasteries, eating habits began to change for the better. In the Renaissance, people began to rediscover some of the pleasures of life, influenced largely by contact with the Orient. Eating was elevated to new heights. People who knew how to cook were in demand. Carving (done with fork and knife) became an art form, and eating utensils were decorated. Silverware also changed: it became lighter, knife tips became more rounded (the fork had taken over the job of piercing), and knife handles became longer.

In later centuries people began to consider knife, fork, and spoon as a set and decorated them accordingly, manufacturing a dozen or more of them at a time. It became a custom to give a set of silverware to each guest. The introduction of coffee and tea encouraged social gatherings, which in turn resulted in new pieces of silverware: coffee, tea, and mocha spoons, sugar tongs and cookie tongs. Many of the special utensils that are still in use today came into being during the Renaissance, such as fruit, dessert, fish, oyster forks and soup ladles. It seems as if the history of silverware is also the history of our culture. Food is not only one of life's necessities, but it is also one of life's most pleasurable experiences.

Did you know?

Sterling silver is an alloy of 92 1/2% silver and 7 1/2% copper. Its beauty increases with use which causes a patina or soft sheen to form...

Silver tarnishes when exposed to air. This occurs more quickly in damp weather, but is inevitable in any climate. Store your silver in treated cloth (or tissue paper treated with silver nitrate will deter tarnish) or lined cabinets, never in plastic bags with rubber bands!

Polishing silver while wearing rubber gloves promotes tarnish. Instead, choose plastic or cotton gloves.

Silver has enemies, rubber, corrodes silver and it can become so deeply etched that only a silversmith can repair the damage. Raised designs can be lost permanently.

Avoid using storage cabinets or chests with rubber seals, rubber floor coverings or rubberbands to wrap your silver items!

Other enemies of silver include salt, olives, salad dressing, eggs, vinegars, fruit juices. In other words acid and silver do not mix!

Flowers and fruit look lovely in silver containers the acid produced as they decay can etch the containers and cause serious damage. When using silver containers, use plastic or glass liners.

Cleaning flatware:

Remember flatware is forks and spoons, cutlery is knives only!

Wash in warm sudsy water. Rinse well and dry immediately. Do not let hollow handled silverware or hollow ware stand in water as a combination of heat, water, and detergent may loosen soldering.

Pearl, ivory, and horn handles on silver utensils also need to be handled with the same caution as above.

Washing in a dishwasher:

Silverware may be washed in a dishwasher but the patina on fine silver or silver plate can only be enhanced by the rubbing that occurs when washing and drying by hand.

Hollow handles may be loosened with exposure to heat and detergent in the dishwasher.

If washing sterling silver and stainless steel flatware in the dish washer, do not put in the same basket section or let one metal touch the other, or the silver may be permanently damaged.

To clean off tarnish, coat the silver with tooth paste, then run it under warm water, work it into a foam and rinse it off. For stubborn stains or intricate grooves, use an old soft bristled tooth brush.

You don't have to buy an expensive commercial polish unless you want to. Fine whiting, available at paint stores makes an excellent polish.

Dampen a soft cloth with a little ammonia or denatured alcohol (flammable), dip it in whiting and apply like any other polish.

Text from:

do it yourself.com, antique silver by ian pickford, how to clean everything by alma chesnut moore, and collected bits of wisdom passed on from chateau and manoir owners from all over.....