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How to Charm and Do Business Over Dinner

Navigating a business dinner can be complicated, but a successful evening out will solidify any business relationship. [Nina Zagat](#), who co-founded Zagat Survey restaurant guides, has dined out several times a week at New York's best restaurants for more than 30 years, and she is a skilled guide to the unwritten rules of such meals.

The main goal for Ms. Zagat is for the person with whom she is dining—whether it's a colleague or a potential business partner—to leave the meal knowing more about who she is as a person. "The feeling that [all] people should come away with at the end of the business dinner is one that they've had a really nice conversation, met interesting people and had a good time," says the 68-year-old, who owns the restaurant-guide business with her husband, Tim. "That's sort of the home run."

Before choosing a restaurant, Ms. Zagat finds out about her fellow diners' food and location preferences. "Think about who your guests are going to be," says Ms. Zagat, who often visits restaurants like Jean Georges near her Midtown office.



None

Nina Zagat, shown here with husband Tim, finds out about fellow diners' food and location preferences before choosing a restaurant.

Since restaurant dining rooms can be loud, she suggests seeking out places where diners don't need to strain to carry on a conversation. Look for restaurants with tables placed far apart or with several smaller dining rooms, instead of one large space.

For larger groups, Ms. Zagat likes round tables, which feel "inclusive," and prefers not to sit at the head of a very long table. When being seated, the host or hostess should ask the guest of honor or business partner to sit on his or her right side, she says. And when dining *à deux*, she says, just ask your dining partner which seat he or she would like.

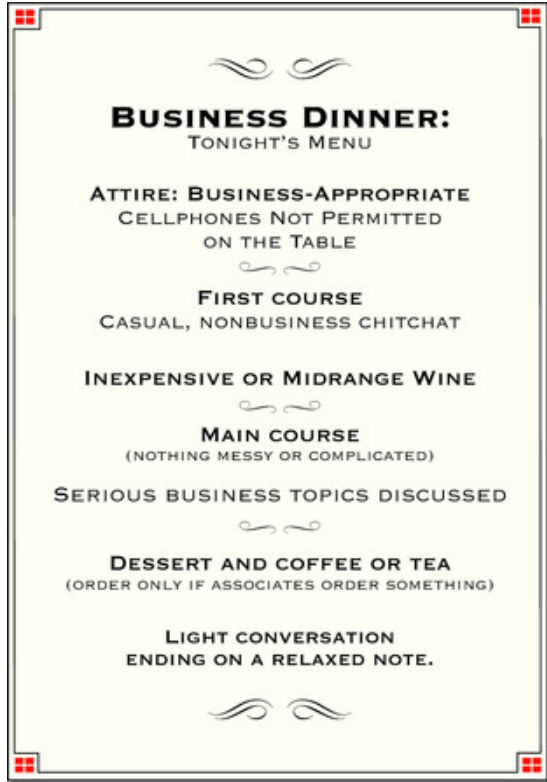
When ordering, Ms. Zagat has one key rule: "At a business dinner, you're not trying to draw a lot of attention to yourself

and what you're eating," she says. A pet peeve she cites is when others are not discreet about their food allergies or other dietary restrictions when eating or ordering.

Since food shouldn't become the focus of the evening, she avoids dishes that are complicated to eat such as lobster and spaghetti, and she says it's all right, if you're not hungry, to request half-portions or to offer to share appetizers or dessert.

In a similar vein, if she is the first person to finish her entrée, she won't let a waiter take the plate until her dining companions are finished. If the other diners aren't ordering tea or dessert, she'll skip the last course. And if she leaves the room momentarily, Ms. Zagat discreetly leaves her napkin on the chair, rather than displaying

it—and its possible food spots—on the table.



Ordering the most expensive bottles of wine could also draw unwanted attention, coming off as showy, Ms. Zagat says. Asking the sommelier to recommend a low to midrange bottle is your best bet. "Even at dinner last night, we said 'Can you recommend a wine that's not more than X' and gave some other qualifications," she says.

She draws no rigid boundaries when it comes to conversation. She even talks about politics, as long as the conversation doesn't get heated. One kind of communication, however, is discouraged. While she believes taking out a mobile device to read notes or refer to an email is acceptable, she never leaves her phone on the table or lets it ring.

Ms. Zagat likes to chitchat until she's well into a meal, rather than turning to business-related topics right away. Start off "with a nice conversation, find out what people are interested in," she suggests. Be careful of coming across as pushy. "If there are points you want to discuss, don't throw them on the table right at the beginning," she says.

At the same time, Ms. Zagat never waits until dessert to bring up serious business matters. She wants the night

to end on a casual note: "The most important thing is to have a relaxed time," she says.

—Alina Dizik

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