Jan. 2, 2004. 10:40 AM

Certified etiquette consultant Leanne Pepper delivers a hands-on dining seminar to MBA students from the Rotman School of Management at University of Toronto.

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**Finer points of the meet and eat**

Modern meals may have gone the way of the microwave but manners still count

**ANN PERRY**

WORKPLACE ISSUES REPORTER

The first course hasn't arrived and etiquette class is already going badly.

Some pupils have settled into their chairs without waiting for their fellow diners. Others have seized their napkins by one corner and unfurled them in the air rather than discreetly unfolding them in their laps.

And then the biggest faux pas yet: The buns start circling the table in the wrong direction — left, instead of right — and by the time anyone realizes it's too late.

Leanne Pepper, a certified etiquette and protocol consultant and general manager of the University of Toronto Faculty Club, is teaching the finer points of dining to about 40 MBA students from the Rotman
School of Management tonight. She stands behind a lectern in the club's elegant main dining room, a plate and cutlery at the ready for demonstrations, and chirps out directions.

"Good manners," Pepper tells her pupils, "are like a roadmap for society."

These business students hope good manners will also give them an edge. The job market still hasn't bounced back from the technology bust, and knowing your way around a formal meal — a common interview venue — can mean the difference between landing a plum position at a top-tier consulting firm and heading back to the career centre.

"A recruiting company needs to know that the person they're looking at has that kind of sophistication and business savvy that they can put in front of their clients," says Mirella Nestor, manager of the corporate connections centre at Rotman.

Many business decisions are made at social events, she says, so "knowing how to be comfortable in those kinds of environments is essential so you can put the business of which fork to use behind you and you can really just focus on making the pitch or the sale to the client."

The MBA students approach etiquette class with the same zeal they would finance and marketing.

The room goes quiet when the soup arrives as students concentrate on sitting up straight, sweeping their spoons away from them and coming out with just the right amount: three-quarters full to avoid drips.

Never blow on food to cool it off, Pepper warns pre-emptively.

"I feel like I'm hanging out with my mother," one woman whispers to the table.

The soup bowls are cleared and the salad arrives, a fussy bundle of mixed greens wrapped snugly in a near-translucent sliver of cucumber.

Students glance tentatively from their forks to their plates, then back to their forks.

Pepper walks them through it. With cutlery, she says, always work from the outside in.

She demonstrates the American and continental styles — in the former, cutting food with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right, then transferring the fork to the right hand to lift the morsel to one's mouth; in the latter, keeping the fork always in the left hand — before recommending the continental fashion as less noisy and cumbersome.

Some diners, afraid of committing a gaffe, refuse to release their cutlery from newly learned grips until their salad plates are clean.

Pepper circulates among the half-dozen tables, answering questions, gently correcting slips and looking for misplaced finishing positions — cutlery should rest on the plate at the 10:20 position on a clock — fork tines and knife blade pointing toward the 10, with tines face down, she reminds one student.

The appetizers conquered, the students hone their new dining skills on the main course, a gooey dish of manicotti.

Follow your host and keep pace with the table, Pepper says. Don't drink alcohol at business functions. Never order long noodles — spaghetti, fettuccini and their cousins — or mussels.

She also prepares them for the worst. When eating meat, if you take a bite of gristle, remove it with your index finger and thumb and put it on the side of your plate. Then cover it with something so others don't have
to look at it. And if you spill your drink, stay calm and let the wait staff take care of it.

Good table manners aren't a stuffy throwback to Emily Post. Proper etiquette, Pepper says later in an interview, "makes you more confident in a situation you're not familiar with."

"A lot of people go into a formal dinner table and they're lost," she says. "They don't know what cutlery to use, and that is so important, especially if you are going to be at that level of entertaining (and) taking clients out."

But many people don't learn formal table manners any more, Pepper says.

She blames the demise of Sunday dinner — a formal ritual in many Canadian households for decades — and the rise of fast food. You don't need a fork, let alone three forks, to eat a Big Mac.

Manners are also cultural and many of the diners here tonight are from countries where protocol, food and even utensils are vastly different from North America. "For international students, this is a learning experience," Nestor says.

Eric Yang, a first-year student at Rotman, signed up for the course to help his job prospects, but also out of interest.

"Where I come from eating is a very important part of the culture, so I wanted to know how Canadians eat," says Yang, originally from Shanghai.

"After the course, I realize that I won't make big mistakes — maybe small mistakes — and this gives me a lot of comfort."

Common errors among students, Pepper says, include using the wrong bread and butter plate (it's on your left) and eating salad with the dessert fork.

"It's not the end of the world, mind you," says Pepper.

"But if you're in a very formal setting, especially if you are a guest, you want to know what to do in that situation."

The challenge, she says, is "trying to break old habits."

Pepper has taught dining etiquette to Rotman students for about three years, and recently attended a four-day course at the Protocol School of Washington in Maine.

This month, she'll put a group of engineering students — better known for keg parties than good table manners — through their paces.

The business students savour chocolate tartufo and coffee as Pepper gives them last-minute instructions. The fall term has made way for corporate recruiting season, and they'll be ready to tackle any question — or dining dilemma — an interviewer sends their way.

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