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Dinner-date dilemma

Lines can be blurry for men and women over who pays check

By Warren Wise

The grilled mountain trout and sautéed spinach linger on their palates as the dating couple enjoy their last few sips of wine. Suddenly, the most awkward moment of the evening descends on their outing.

A server approaches with a leatherette portfolio and drops off the bill.

Who pays?

In a different era when women didn't work outside the home, it was taken for granted that men, the traditional breadwinners, paid for the meal.

But times have changed, and it's a bit more complicated now.

After a wave of feminism swept the country in the 1970s and because women started working outside of the home more, they were encouraged to empower themselves as equals by offering to pay for meals during a courtship.

It was slow to catch on, and it's still widely accepted that the man pays, at least on the first date, and especially if he initiated the date. Otherwise, he runs the risk of looking like a cheapskate and deep-sixing any chance of a second date.

Still, some women insist they each pay their own way on the first date.

"I never let the guy pay," said Calynn Johnson, 20. "I insist that we split the bill."

The College of Charleston biochemistry major said some guys are uncomfortable with her approach.



"I guess I'm just more progressive," Johnson said. "I think it's old-fashioned and archaic. If I want to be an equal partner in a relationship, I should contribute equally."

Lori Esteves, 41, said when she was dating in her early 30s before getting married a second time, she offered to pay on the first date because she made more money than her boyfriend, who worked as a police officer at the time.

"I didn't feel like it was fair for him to pay all the time," Esteves said. "In this day and age, you shouldn't expect someone else to pay your way."

Once, Esteves' boyfriend was insulted that she offered to pay her own way.

"Because he was so insistent, I let him pay," she said. "I didn't want to insult him."

Some men can feel emasculated when the woman offers to pay early in a relationship.

Keon Masters, 20, said he doesn't like not being able to pay.

"Typically, I pay, but there are those occasions where girls know we are as broke as they are," the college junior said. "Sometimes, they are stubborn and won't let me pay."

Tyler Vukoder, 19, said he always pays on the first couple of dates.

"Once you get to know the girl, she could pick up the bill and offer to pay," the college student said. "Today, girls want to let us know they are capable of paying. I would still have my money out though."

Local etiquette expert Cindy Grosso said the person who extends the invitation to dinner should pay or be prepared to pay.

If it's a first date and the man asks the woman out, he should pay.

"Social etiquette is based on chivalry," said Grosso, owner of the Charleston School of Protocol and Etiquette. "Is chivalry dead? No, it's not."

If a woman invites a man on a first date, something Grosso said she would never do personally, it's a bit trickier.

"From a host aspect, she should pay," Grosso said. "From a chivalry aspect, he might have a problem with it."



The woman should be prepared to pay, but if the man offers, she should let him pay, Grosso said.

"I feel like it would bother a man not to pay on the first date," she said.

If the woman insists on paying, let her, Grosso said.

It's OK after the two get to know each other for the dating couple to alternate paying the bill, but they should never split the check.

"It devalues the relationship," she said.

Syndicated advice columnist Amy Alkon, who writes at www.advicegoddess.com, also thinks the initiator should pay, and women should never ask men on dates.

"Women who pursue men seem to be devalued by men," Alkon said. "It creates a bad power balance in the relationship. There is this feminist lie that we are all the same, but we are not. We are very different. Women want providers whether in a tribe in Africa or in Beverly Hills or in Charleston."

She also said first dates should be cheap, short and local.

"It's a big mistake for a man to take a woman to a fine French restaurant on the first date even if he has a lot of money," Alkon said. "This is the equivalent to giving a big, expensive gift to a total stranger on the street. It sets the guy up as a patsy. He should pay, but he shouldn't be mortgaging anything to pay for it."

Like Grosso, Alkon said that on the second date it's nice for the woman to offer to pay, whether she does or not, but not to make insincere gestures such as rummaging through her purse and pulling out a mint or making tracks to the ladies' room when the check arrives.

Because guys aren't sure what to do anymore, it's OK to alternate paying as the courtship unfolds, Alkon said.

"That way, it's two adults dating and not like Daddy giving her an allowance," she said.

Alkon also suggests that the woman subtly peek at the amount of tip a guy leaves on the first date because it's evidence of his character.



In today's uncertain economy, couples should do things that don't require a lot of money, Alkon said.

A gallery opening, street fair or short hiking adventure can allow a couple to interact without the three-hour interrogation of each other over dinner, she said.

"You can talk to each other without the cash register running," Alkon said.

She also recommends not talking too much on a first date.

"Give the other a taste of you and leave them wanting more," Alkon said.

