

oh, what a lovely fork

HOLDING THE PERFECTLY WEIGHTED FORK or palming a well-molded knife is part of the sensual experience of dining. It compliments the kiss of the thin, delicate wine glass and the enticing food on our plate—the equation for dining nirvana.

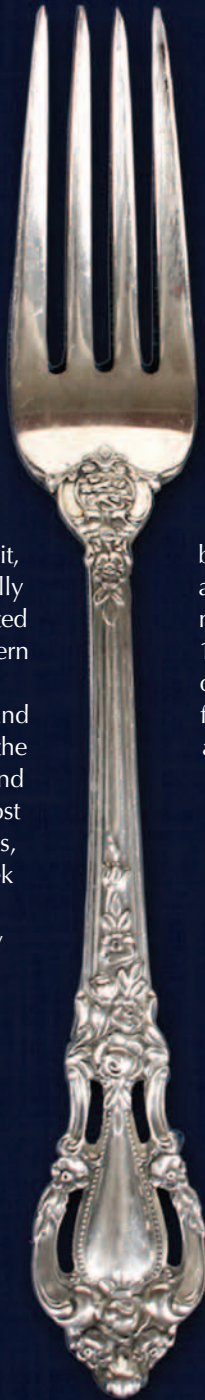
Although the short journey food takes from plate to mouth works fine with our own warm fingers, enculturation dictates otherwise. Picking up a fork is part of our societal DNA.

History tells us that eating utensils were ushered in for hygiene and functionality, with civility on their coattails. But more than just an enlightened habit, flatware evolved into instruments of beauty, visually and tactilely enhancing moments of imbibing. Created over the centuries, it has revealed much about Western culture.

Last spring, the exhibit “Feeding Desire: Design and the Tools of the Table (1500-2005)” opened at the Cooper Hewitt in New York with an expansive and fascinating display of flatware. From early, almost primitive, simple eating tools to lavish settings, walking through this show was like a visual trek through Western society by way of indulgence.

The museum is the 1901 mansion of Andrew Carnegie. In the dining room, a glass-enclosed table was set in the stunning style of the Gilded Age, including a silver-gilt dessert service commissioned from Tiffany’s by J.P. Morgan. A subliminal sound track of a Chopin piano sonata interspersed with clinking glasses put you “there.” Food poised on a silver fork with your hand wrapped around organic patterns, curling ribbons and sashes *had* to make the food taste better, no? If anything, that pensive glance at the well-heeled utensil in your hand surely slowed you down some.

The diversity of utensils was great; many were crafted with silver, gold, ivory, stainless steel, brass; many were artistically inlaid with pearl or semiprecious stones. Handles of richly carved ivory for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cutlery were small-scale men and women ensconced with flora and fauna. Holding



these icons while eating must have given one a sense of companionship—like eating with an imaginary friend or protective deity. A nineteenth-century silver spoon handle reveals a savage, snarling feline about to chomp on an ascending snail; seventeenth-century art-carved utensils used for traveling fit neatly in a softly worn, much-handled sharkskin travel case, while the modern traveling eatery “Snac Pac” is antiseptic plastic and stainless steel. Danish simplicity joined dazzling Steuben Glass cutlery.

Cutlery designed to control impulsive behavior beyond the dictates of etiquette books included such anomalies as the “diet” spoon (with a hole in the middle), a battery operated “Slenderfork” from the 1970s, whose flashing a red light signaled a maxed-out calorie allotment, and specially slatted red plastic flatware for prison inmates (designed to break if used as a weapon).

A carved ivory Swiss fork from the late-eighteenth century featured “Topsy Taverner,” a slovenly figure grasping a mug to his cheek with his head thrown back. Holding the little inebriated fellow while piercing a piece of meat might be scant consolation for the fact that the act of eating is really a very lonely, singular process. With the advent of cutlery, the intimate, primitive practice of communal dipping became nonexistent in Western culture. Philosophically, it says that one’s ego evolved to protect the self; practically speaking, rubbing your bread in the same bowl with the next guy means sharing germs—abstaining from the cozy ritual says “I’m protecting myself from you, I come first; community comes second.”

Communal-based cultures seemed to have diminished in the shadow of “me first” societies. But perhaps there’s still some shared practice lurking around the dining table. Just think of fingering those French fries while swabbing them in your friend’s cup of ketchup—it’s the next best thing to brotherhood.

