

## **Recruits learn to mind their manners**

**Eager to help potential hires make a good impression, some firms are helping them polish their etiquette, BEPPI CROSARIOL writes**

BEPPI CROSARIOL

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TORONTO -- The 40 students attending dinner at McMillan Binch Mendelsohn LLP's 44th-floor offices in Toronto last month might have been justified in arriving with empty stomachs. Big Bay Street firms are known for putting on a spread when courting prospective recruits, and these were elite scholars from University of Toronto.

But just as the cabernet started flowing and waiters emerged with Asian canapés, a woman abruptly announced from the wings: "If you learn just one thing tonight, it's eat before you get to the event. If you're too focused on the food, people are going to wonder what's going on."

Welcome to business etiquette for law students, a field trip in the art of cocktail schmoozing, table manners and professional dressing taught by decorum consultants Lynn Waugh and Lisa Wright of Toronto's Etiquette Advantage.

The free session, sponsored by McMillan Binch and U of T's faculty of law, was designed to raise the firm's profile on campus as well as to help build students' confidence for the recruiting season ahead.

It's also part of a trend in corporate law toward training future partners in the softer skills needed to charm clients, influence colleagues and forge successful careers in today's increasingly competitive legal market.

"I have taken courses at law school that I will never use," said Kasra Nejatian, 24, one of the attendees. "This I will always use."

Mr. Nejatian, who already has a business degree from Queen's University in Kingston, says he's interested in a career in corporate law but has already ruled out litigation, and he harbours no romantic delusions about a life in barrister's robes. "It's not like I'll be meeting with a judge for a pretrial," he said. "All my meetings will be over wine and gin and tonics."

Of the many mundane but practical lessons Mr. Nejatian learned at the McMillan Binch class was steering clear of awkward cocktail foods, such as meat skewers. Why? They usually involve messy dipping sauces and exceed the two-bite maximum that ensures a free right hand for shaking (assuming you are already correctly holding your drink in your left). "I've tried everything, including where you balance the glass on the top of the plate, which clearly doesn't work," Mr. Nejatian said, deftly brandishing his wine glass by the stem to avert unsightly smudges on the bowl.

Among other handy pointers: How to rest a knife and fork when finished dining at the table (parallel on the plate, like the hands of a clock reading 10:20) and how to engage clients by drawing them in with flattering questions, such as, "What's it like . . . ?" and "How did you get involved in . . . ?"

One factor driving the trend toward etiquette instruction is demographics. Big law firms nowadays are obsessed with hiring the brightest minds, and that means embracing a wider ethnic spectrum than in the past. Like many in his diverse U of T class, Mr. Nejatian is an immigrant, having moved to Canada from Iran when he was 12. He says he signed up for the class partly as an exercise in cultural assimilation, because in Iran, where main courses consist of "lots of rice and stews," he was not

accustomed to using a knife, and salads are served at the end of the meal, not the start. "I've had to relearn all this stuff."

McMillan Binch, which holds similar events for students from other universities, isn't alone. At Borden Ladner Gervais LLP's Vancouver office, articling students and associates can enroll in a wine-appreciation course taught by partners Freddie Pletcher and Robert Owen. Mr. Pletcher, a corporate securities specialist and grape buff, says even a modicum of wine knowledge can be a valuable asset.

"Twenty years ago, all people drank was beer. Now you're seeing a lot more wine drinkers," he said. "The intention is that when they go out for a lunch or a dinner with clients and they're presented with a wine list, they don't turn ghost white and say, 'Uh, would you like to decide?' "

Mr. Pletcher's most recent class in February focused on pinot noir, the grape made trendy by the Hollywood movie *Sideways* and included tips on how to read a wine label.

They did lose one potential young convert, however, when they opened a rare but over-the-hill 1969 Aloxe-Corton. "It was just a dead wine and one of the students said, 'So, I hadn't really drunk much wine before, but after trying this, I don't think I really want to.'"

At national firm McCarthy Tétrault in Toronto, Stewart Whittingham, director of continuing legal education for Ontario, regularly enlists the help of Etiquette Advantage and also teaches his own sessions on modern e-mail etiquette. His take-home message: Don't send anything you wouldn't be comfortable printing on law firm letterhead and mailing by regular post.

Another firm embracing the manners mission is Fraser Milner Casgrain LLP. For the benefit of new recruits at its Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver offices, the firm runs FMC University, dealing with extralegal topics like law firm economics and how to market your practice. It also sponsored a session last June for 70 lawyers covering everything from voice-mail etiquette to dressing for casual Fridays to the art of a firm handshake.

"What we owe these kids is to not let them embarrass us out there," said Adam Pekarsky, the national firm's director of professional development and recruitment for Western Canada.

He says besides offering recruits lessons on table manners and conversational skills, he and fellow partners -- like their counterparts at many other firms -- intentionally draw applicants into wine-and-dine settings to surreptitiously gauge their social savoir faire.

He recalls one candidate last year making a big impression for the wrong reason while attempting to scarf down another hazardous cocktail food, sushi. "He's trying to make a good impression and you can tell he's wearing his Sunday best, but he's indelicately covering himself with soy sauce and rice and wasabi [a mustard-like condiment]. It was just comical. It was something out of a movie."

Mr. Pekarsky says the firm ultimately passed on the student but that he continues to be remembered via an in-house nickname, Sushi Guy. "The worst part is, this guy had really good grades, and the reason we remembered him is because of that."

He says while the etiquette tests may sound unfair, when it comes to networking, people aren't so much *what* they eat as *how* they eat.

"We're picturing you two years from now at the Saddledome with the general counsel of a large oil company, talking to him while attempting to eat sushi or drinking a glass of wine. And that does matter, and the impressions people form do matter."



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Philip Crawley, Publisher