

Restaurants: Language, Culture, and NC Foods

Some useful language and cultural information for eating out in the Chapel Hill community.

What this handout is about

This handout will help you have a more pleasant experience in American restaurants. It explains the things that waiters will most commonly say, as well as some of our cultural customs. It will help you answer the waiter's questions and understand more about traditional southern food.

What does the waiter say and do during your restaurant visit?

- The waiter says hello and says "My name is ____ and I'll be your server today," or "I'll be taking care of you today."
- The waiter asks "What can I get you to drink?" or "Can I get you something to drink?"
- If you order alcohol, the waiter asks "Can I see your ID?" (identification to prove you're over 21)
- When drinks arrive, the waiter asks "Do you need a few more minutes?" (to look at the menu) or "Are you ready to order?" or "Do you know what you want?"
- When food arrives, the waiter asks "Do you need/Can I get you anything else?"
- Five minutes later, the waiter asks "Is everything okay?" or "How's everything?"
- Twenty minutes later, the waiter asks "Are you still working on that?" or "Can I get that out of your way?"
- If there is a lot of food on your plate, the waiter may ask "Do you need a box?" or "Do you want to take that home with you?" or "Do you want me to box that up for you?"
- The waiter asks again "Can I get you anything else?" or "Did you save room for dessert?" or "Would you like to see a dessert menu?"
- The waiter brings the check and says "I'll take that whenever you're ready."
- The waiter picks up your money and asks "Do you need change?"
- As you're leaving, someone says, "Thanks for coming. Have a nice day/evening."

What are the customs of American restaurants?

- Americans "leave a tip" (extra money for the waiter to keep). The amount of the tip is between 10% and 20% of the total bill, depending on how good the service was. Waiters and waitresses earn wages that are below the national minimum wage. They rely on this extra money.
- An 18% tip (also called "gratuity") is automatically added to the bill in most restaurants if the party is larger than five people. You can add an extra tip if you'd like to, but you don't have to.
- "Separate checks" (each person pays separately for their own food and drink) are usually not allowed for parties of six or more.

- “Splitting the check” (each person contributes equally to the total bill) is not typical in the US. If the restaurant won’t allow separate checks, people will often figure their total at the table and contribute cash to pay for only their own food and drink, plus tip.
- Many restaurants allow you to substitute one ingredient for another, like having fruit instead of potatoes with your omelet. Some restaurants charge extra, but others don’t. Just ask.
- American restaurants bring out each course very quickly. Your entrée will probably arrive before you’re finished with your appetizer or salad. If you’d like to eat the meal slowly, ask the waiter to “hold the dinner order for a while” after he puts the appetizer order in.
- Many American waiters consider it good service to visit your table several times during the meal to ask if everything is okay or if you need anything. If this bothers you, you can say, “Thanks for checking. I’ll let you know if we need anything.”
- If your waiter is not paying attention when you need something, it’s acceptable to ask another employee for help. Get someone’s attention by making eye contact and raising your hand up in front of your shoulder, or simply say “Excuse me, would you ask my waiter to come over, please?” to any other passing waiter.
- Dirty plates are usually taken off the table very quickly. If you haven’t eaten a bite for a few minutes, your waiter might come to the table and ask if you’re finished or if you’re “still working on that.” Again, if you’d like to savor the meal slowly, you can politely say to the waiter, “We’re just taking our time.”
- It’s common for people to take leftover food home, particularly since American restaurant portions can be so large. “Do you want a box for that?” or “Do you want me to box that up?” or “Do you want a doggie bag?” are the questions you’ll hear.
- The waiter may put the check on the table before you’re finished eating. This is not meant to make you rush through your meal. It’s meant to be convenient for you to pay whenever you’re ready without having to get his attention again. He may say something like “I’ll take that whenever you’re ready” or “Take your time.”
- When you pay your bill with cash, waiters will often ask, “Do you need change?” This is a way of asking if they can keep the leftover money as their tip. You can say, “No, keep the change” if the tip is sufficient, or you can simply say “Yes, please” and leave the tip separately.
- Children are expected to stay at the table with their parents and to be quiet enough that they don’t disturb other people in the restaurant. Parents are expected to take small children outside immediately if they are crying or screaming, returning after the child has calmed down.

What questions will the waiter ask when you order certain things?

When you ask for	You may be asked	You should know
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Alcohol	“Can I see your ID?”	Legal drinking age in North Carolina is 21. You’ll have to show identification to prove your age.
Eggs	“How do you want your eggs?”	<p>Boiled: boiled in the shell. Soft-boiled (semi-liquid yolk), hard-boiled (solid yolk)</p> <p>Fried: cracked into a buttered pan, not turned over during cooking</p> <p>Over: a fried egg that’s turned over during cooking. Three choices: Over easy (liquid yolk), Over medium (semi-liquid yolk), Over hard (solid yolk)</p> <p>Poached: cracked into a small dish resting in hot water</p> <p>Scrambled: eggs are blended together before cooking and stirred during the cooking process to make them fluffy</p> <p>Sunny-side up: same as fried</p>
Your entrée (If the fine print under the Entrée heading says they are served with your choice of side dishes)	“Choice of sides?”	<p>Look for a separate list on the menu, labeled “Side Dishes” or “Sides.” You can choose anything you want, up to the number of sides you’re allowed with the entrée.</p> <p>If choices are listed with each entrée, look for the word “or” to put the choices into categories. E.g., <i>Served with (home fries or grits), (bacon, ham, or sausage), and (toast or biscuit).</i> Choose one from each category.</p>
Meat entrée	“Choice of potato?”	Your choices are baked potato, mashed potatoes, French fries and sometimes “steak fries,” which are extra thick French fries, or “home fries,” which are cubes browned in a skillet. If you choose baked, you’ll be asked if you want butter and sour cream as well.
Sandwich	“Fries or coleslaw?”	“Fries” is short for “French fries.” Coleslaw is a chopped cabbage salad with a slightly tangy taste. It’s a traditional southern food.
Salad	“Choice of dressing?”	Salad dressings are usually listed on the menu. You can ask for it “on the side.” It will be served separately in a small bowl. Popular dressings include Ranch (buttermilk with herbs), Italian (oil, vinegar, garlic, herbs), French (spicy tomato), Vinaigrette (balsamic or fruit vinegar), and Blue Cheese (pungent cheese).
Steak	“How do you want that?” or “How do you want that cooked?”	Rare (cooked very little), medium-rare, medium, medium-well, or well-done (fully cooked).
Tea	“Sweet or un-sweet?”	Cold tea is “Sweet” or “un-sweet” Sweet tea is black tea with LOTS of sugar. It is extremely sweet. Emphasize UNSweet if that’s what you want.

The bill (“the check”)	“Is this together or separate?” “All on one check?”	In small parties, each person can receive a separate check. If you plan to pay separately, let the waiter know before you place your order.
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What are some traditional foods in North Carolina?

Barbecue (bbq)	Western NC bbq is chopped pork in a spicy vinegar-based sauce with tomato. Eastern NC bbq is chopped pork in a vinegar based sauce without tomato. See this map of the Historic Barbecue Trail from the North Carolina Barbecue Society.
Black eyed peas	Also called cowpeas, these are mild-flavored beans.
Biscuits	White-flour bread rolls, served alone or with white sausage gravy, or as bread for a fried chicken sandwich.
Cheese grits	Grits with cheddar cheese and seasonings.
Chittlins	Pig intestines either boiled or fried with spices.
Chow chow	Relish made from green tomatoes, onions, and various other ingredients.
Cole slaw	Shredded green cabbage, carrots, green onion, with or without creamy dressing.
Collards	Green leafy vegetable that must be boiled until it’s soft enough to eat.
Cornbread	Cake-like bread made with yellow cornmeal.
Fried green tomatoes	Green tomatoes pan-fried in a light cornmeal batter.
Grits	American polenta. Like mashed potatoes, but made from white corn.
Home fries	Sliced or cubed pan-fried potatoes.
Hoppin’ John	Black-eyed peas, onions, and ham, usually eaten on New Year’s Day for good luck.
Hush puppies	Deep fried balls of cornbread.
Okra	An edible vegetable seed pod. Most often served fried in a cornmeal batter.
Shrimp and grits	Grits with shrimp, bacon, cheese, onions, garlic, salt and pepper.
Sweet potato	Orange-fleshed potato with a sweet flavor, usually served mashed with butter and brown sugar, or made into a pie.

Where can I find different types of restaurants in the area?

<https://www.visit Chapel Hill.org/restaurants/>

<http://www.durham-nc.com/dining/eat/>



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