The Art of the Table: A Complete Guide to Table Setting, Table Manners, and Tableware by Suzanne Von Drachenfels

Do you know how to set the table? Worry about your dinner manners? Finally, with The Art of the Table, Suzanne von Drachenfels comes to the rescue with a truly comprehensive guide to the correct use of tableware and confidence-building information about proper dining etiquette. Von Drachenfels, a former Tabletop Consultant for dinnerware makers Fitz & Floyd, defines the vocabulary of tableware and explains the selection, use, and care of dinnerware, flatware, stemware, and table linens. She expertly details the basic service techniques for all types of entertainment, and even includes advice on menu planning. Learn how to read the labels of wine bottles or how to filet a fish at the table; learn where and when to sit down and the proper way to eat finger foods. Spicing up the how-to text are fascinating tidbits of social and culinary history. Who knew, for instance, that the first napkin was a lump of dough or that ancient Egyptian feasts often concluded with a coffin laid out with an imitation skeleton to remind diners to appreciate the bounteous gifts of life? The author reveals the origins of everyday expressions--such as eating humble pie--and covers the history of table manners to shed light on the commonsense reasons behind today's customs. Food service professionals--restaurateurs, service staff, and caterers--will find the book an indispensable guide to the correct way to set a table and present food, but anyone who has a need or yearning to know the nitty-gritty of table setting, table manners, and tableware will be sure to find answers to all of their questions and more in this exhaustive reference book. --Robin Donovan

My Personal Review:
The word COMPLETE is accurate. This is the definitive guide to the various pieces of china, flatware, stemware, serveware, and linens, as well
as how they emerged from the mists of history, how they are made, what the terminology surrounding them means, and how to use them. This is far more than a guide to how to set a table and how to behave at a table. This is an important, authoritative reference work for anyone with a serious, ongoing interest in the topics that this book covers.

The book teaches much about history: The evolution of pottery begins in Neolithic times (21), and this book guides readers through Egyptian pottery, Greek pottery, etc., up through European, English, and American pottery and porcelain, not neglecting Chinese and Islamic contributions. (The author covers flatware, stemware, and serveware in a similar fashion, including methods of manufacturing and terminology.) This book would thus be helpful to anyone seriously interested in collecting any type of tableware (china, silverware, or stemware). Another result of the authors breadth of historical knowledge is the explanations of many expressions that survive to the present day, such as to whet the appetite: The medieval host did not supply dinner knives to his guests. A whetstone was often placed by the entrance hall so that guests could sharpen their knives before a feast. Hence the expression `to whet the appetite in keen anticipation of food (178-179).

The book covers various meals, including formal and informal dinners, buffets, formal and informal luncheons, afternoon tea, and high tea. The author provides much information about menus, both foods and beverages. She covers wine, tea, and coffee.

The beauty of this book lies not only in its thoroughness, but also its unexpected tidbits. People who pride themselves on knowing of the existence of the cream soup spoon, the ice cream fork, the strawberry fork, the lobster fork, and the pastry fork may be surprised to learn that these pieces would never properly be used as part of a formal dinner. (The author explains why.) Miss Manners brushes aside the distinction between a teacup and a coffee cup by saying that your guests wont notice the difference anyway unless you place them side by side, but this author defines pieces used at an individual place setting: eleven types of plates (including which are made as part of a dinnerware set, such as a dinner plate and a salad plate, and which are not, such as a fish plate and a dessert plate), nine types of bowls, seven types of cups, seven types of knives, fourteen types of spoon, thirteen types of forks, and eighteen types of stemware.

On a few points, this author seems more old-fashioned than Miss Manners (Judith Martin). Miss Manners rejects the traditional rule for formal dinners that the number of male and female guests must be equal, as the result is to exclude single women, widows, and divorcées. However, this book must, in most matters, be regarded as definitive.