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AMAZING Grace

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At 'Mimi's Manners,' children learn how to eat a red frog

By KAREN FELDMAN

Photos by GARTH FRANCIS

Eleven well-dressed children file into the private dining room at The Ritz-Carlton, Naples, and look for their name cards at the lavishly set table.

Most of the girls wear long dresses the boys sport ties and jackets.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to The Ritz-Carlton," says Suzanne Willis, who presides at the head of the table. "We're here to have a little fun, learn some manners and have some great food."

Welcome to "Mimi's Manners," a course Willis designed based on the lessons her grandmother taught her.

By day, Willis is the public relations director for the two Ritz resorts in Naples. On this night, she is Ms.

Suzanne, etiquette instructor.

Graciousness is a big part of manners, as Willis shows right away, reassuring the children, "even at my age there are some things I forget. Just do your best."

They start off with introductions, practicing firm handshakes and making eye contact while greeting the person by name.

Next, they tackle proper mouth-wiping.

Willis lifts the white linen napkin from her lap.

"Blot-blot, blot-blot," she says as she daintily touches it first to the left side of her mouth, then the right.

Servers, dressed in black tuxedos and white gloves, deliver rolls and pats of butter to each young diner.

Willis shows proper bread-eating technique, breaking off a small piece, buttering it and gracefully raising it to her lips and chewing - mouth closed, of course.

Throughout the meal, she scans the group and coaches them on maintaining good posture and keeping their elbows in check - just as her grandmother did.

"Take your `e's' off the table," she says. "Get it? Ease off."

The children get it - at least for a while.

The servers bring in the first course: wild mushroom consomme en croute. The students look quizzically at the puff pastry that tops their soup bowls.

Willis shows them how to negotiate the pastry and reach the soup beneath.

From there, they move on to an intermezzo of raspberry sorbet in little glass hibiscus vases, followed by an entree of roasted chicken breast with white truffle mashed potatoes, asparagus, a roasted tomato and baby carrots.

As the meal progresses, the children relax and conversation picks up.

Alex McMahan, 10, asks, "What happens when you get a bite of chicken and it has a bone?"

Willis has a quick answer.

"Take it out with your fingers and very discreetly put it on the side of your plate."

Dinner concludes with a chocolate Napoleon, an impressive layered affair of chocolate mousse, two chocolate disks, raspberry compote and crème fraîche.

Armed with champagne glasses filled with ginger ale, they offer a toast to the chef, thanking her for the meal.

As the class winds up, parents gather around the room's perimeter, their eyes trained on their children.

Maureen Petilli of Naples enrolled her son, Christian, 8, and daughter, Mia, 11.

"We have a lot of social functions and sometimes take them with us," she says. "Cutting meat can be a huge issue. So is fidgeting."

She's hoping the class will help minimize future skirmishes.

The last lesson of the night is how to write a proper thank-you note - to their parents who sent them to the course, in this case.

On a white note card embossed with The Ritz's trademark lion's head set in a crown, 9-year-old Dana Rogers writes: "Dear Mom or Dad, Thank you for sending me to the Ritz-Carlton. I had a great time. I was wondering if I could go here again because I liked all the awesome food. Also I learned a lot of manners."

Her 7-year-old brother, Coleman, has a slightly different take on the evening. He writes: "Dear Momo and Dado, Thank you for taking me to the Ritz-Carlton. It was very fun cause we got to eat very good food like meat, bread and butter and a dead frog that was red."
Dead frog?

"He means the tomato," says Dana.

IF YOU GO

"Mimi's Manners" costs \$38 per child, which includes dinner. For upcoming sessions, call The Ritz-Carlton at (239) 598-6644.

PHOTO CAPTIONS

TOP: Emma McMahon delicately sips her soup during the first of a four-course dinner served during the etiquette class at The Ritz-Carlton.

RIGHT: Suzanne Willis shows Coleman Rogers the proper way to cut his chicken.

RIGHT: Coleman Rogers takes the first bite of raspberry sorbet.

BELOW CENTER: With a smacking lip sound, Suzanne Willis, instructor of "Mimi's Manners" etiquette class, asks students whether that is the proper way to eat.

BELOW RIGHT: Rachael Stiner tackles her soup, working her way through the puff pastry on top.

TOP: Olivia Lageman tries to contain herself as Suzanne Willis, instructor of the etiquette class, demonstrates how not to slurp your soup.

LEFT: The private dining room in The Ritz-Carlton, Naples, is used for "Mimi's Manners" etiquette classes for children. A four-course dinner is served, and manners are taught as they eat their meal.

ABOVE: Coleman Rogers shows his opinion of the raspberry sorbet.