

“Added Gratuity Not Intended to Deter Large Dining Groups”

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How festive to be part of a large group at a restaurant, with the conversation, the clinking glasses on extended arms, the laughter, the tasting of colleagues' food. At this time of year, with office Christmas lunches taking place throughout the city and suburban towns, restaurants are often filled by groups of people toasting the best wishes for the holidays and exchanging presents. What fun!

The Grinchy side?

Those fateful words at the bottom of the menu reminding diners that there will be no separate checks for large groups and that a set gratuity will be added to the bill.

For example, if you were part of a large group at Interim, you would see this sentence at the bottom of the menu: “20% gratuity added to parties of 8 or more.” If you were dining Downtown at Majestic Grill, which must see a lot of large groups: “An 18 percent gratuity is added for parties of 5-11 persons. 20% added for parties of 12 or more.”

Jim's Place Grill, in Collierville? “An 18% gratuity will be added to parties of six or more adults.”

Ciao Bella Italian Grill? “No separate checks for parties of 6 or more. 18% gratuity added for parties of 6 or more.”

Felicia Suzanne's? “A 20% gratuity is added to all tables of six or more – please no separated checks for parties of six or more.”

Well, you get the idea. It's almost as if restaurants wanted to discourage groups composed of what seems to be the line-drawn-in-the-sand number called “six or more.” And both practices – no separate checks and an automatic gratuity for six or more – are universal in this country. And yet, that's not the case. In fact, restaurant owners have nothing but praise for large groups. Oh, that's right, they're customers!

“We love large groups. Bring 'em on!” said Deni Reilly, co-owner, with husband and chef Patrick Reilly, of Majestic Grill on Main Street. “We're a big restaurant, so we're suitable for large groups. We can handle up to 20 or 30, if necessary. Through the end of the year, because of the holidays, we have reservations for many groups, both office staffs and just people celebrating.”

Majestic even allows separate checks for large groups (not in the private dining rooms).

“When a restaurant insists on one check for a group,” said Reilly, “people get caught up in figuring out who’s paying what, and they do the math wrong and so on. It’s really easier to do separate checks, but we try to determine that beforehand, even at the time of the reservation.”

As for the set gratuity, “that’s to make sure that the server is adequately compensated,” Reilly said. “Again, it saves people from having to calculate. Besides, it takes a special server to be able to handle a large group. Some servers don’t work well in that situation. You have to have a certain presence and be able to command the table’s attention.”

Echoing Reilly’s comment, Glenn Hays said, “We welcome that sort of thing. We like it when groups want to take the whole restaurant.” The restaurant is Café 1912, which Hays owns, with his wife, Martha. He is owner, separately, of Sweet Grass; the couple owned La Tourelle for 30 years, so he speaks from experience.

For the larger groups of six or eight or 10 or whatever – it doesn’t have to be even numbers – not occupying the whole restaurant, Hays said, Café 1912 allows separate checks if they’re requested. “That’s not really an issue now with the computer systems we have. Tracking separate checks is not nearly as laborious as it used to be.”

Every waiter should be able to handle a large group, said Hays, “though some, of course, are better than others. The main concern is to be nimble. Serving food to a lot of people requires speed and dexterity.”

While large groups, “almost without exception,” can get loud, waiters and management have to tread what Hays called “a fine line” between over-managing a group and allowing people to have fun. “Yes, the noise level goes up, people can get boisterous, but we don’t see much obnoxious behavior or excessive drinking. It’s not that kind of restaurant.”

It’s not necessarily the size of the group that raises the noise level, said Scott Gentleman, general manager at the relocated Jim’s Place Restaurant and Bar (formerly Jim’s Place). “I mean, three people can be as loud as 10. It depends on the people more than the size of the group.

Because Jim’s Place has been on Perkins Extended only a few weeks, the restaurant is restricting groups to no more than 12. “We honored some earlier commitments,” Gentleman said, “but we want to make sure everything is running smoothly in the new space before we take larger groups. For that reason, we’re happy to do separate checks.” The restaurant adds a 20 percent gratuity for such groups.

Waiters should have no trouble managing a table of 12 diners, said Gentleman. “Sure, it takes special skills. You’re multi-tasking, remembering people’s faces and what drinks they ordered and so on. You have to be organizationally minded coupled with fast on your feet.”