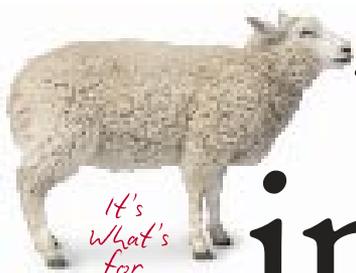




The Reformed Vulgarians

A gentleman
doesn't
shove SHEEP
intestines
into his mouth
willy-nilly.
Especially not
in SCOTLAND, in a castle,
where I'm dressed in my *best*
black suit, adorned with a blue cravat,
and seated at a formal dining table with a fire blazing in
the background. The host is serving HAGGIS, and taking a mouthful is not easy.



*It's
What's
for
Dinner*



The Manner House

Not because I'm grossed out, which I am (the many parts of a sheep that constitute this dish are boiled) ►

in the animal's stomach before it lands on my plate). It's because I am trying to become a gentleman and don't want to mess up before the first bite.

Twenty-four miles northwest of Aberdeen, in the farming and fishing village of Oyne, eight men are in training to eat the local dish in a manner that would befit the Queen of England. I am one, having submitted myself to an intensive 3-day finishing school for gentlemen. Picture an upper-class boot camp, with the role of Louis Gossett Jr. played by a fleet of fancy British women, and you're getting warm.

A lot has to occur before a true gentleman can dig into his dinner. For starters, he must wait for the host to sit down and start eating—this is your cue. But not so fast: First, a gentleman must offer water to the people to his immediate left and right. Next, he should inquire whether anyone in his vicinity needs bread, salt, pepper, or other relevant condiments. Then and only then can he hold his fork tine-side down,

employ his knife to gracefully slide some of the dish onto the end of the fork, and bring the cutlery to his mouth, rather than his mouth to the cutlery, as I have a habit of doing.

"Oh, my," says Diana Mather, the founder of the program, called the Finishing Academy—Teaching Life's Essentials. "We're going to have to work on you and that fork."

I didn't travel thousands of miles to argue with British aristocracy. But what I realize at this moment—and she surely senses—is that we're going to have to work on a lot more than forks.

I was not raised by wolves; just loud, ungraceful, though loving, Jews. I do not talk with my mouth full. I give up my seat on the bus to the elderly, the pregnant, and the good-looking. I stopped spitting in public years ago. I rarely walk empty-handed into a home to which I have been invited. I am, by and large, good to my mother.

No, I am not an animal. But I grip a fork like a caveman, and I have serious deficiencies in other departments. There's no debating the fact that I cannot dance. And while I love my weekly hoops game, I am also not at heart a "sportsman." I'm a good guy, certainly good enough to find a girl to marry me, but I am not a gentleman in the most expansive sense of that word.

Finishing Academy managing directors Diana Mather and Penny Edge realized there were many men like me. They had a hunch that we would come from all across the world and pay a pretty penny to unlearn bad habits and cultivate new skills. When I told my friends that I was going to a "gentlemen's school," most pictured me among a bunch of Bad Manners Bears, all of us struggling to walk with a book on our heads and speak clearly with

pebbles in our mouths. And that's part of it. But a man obsessed solely with cultivating these parts of the puzzle conjures up a quasi-guy who's hopelessly un-masculine. When you add the sporty skills into the mix (shooting, golf), along with a pinch of modern-life know-how and practicality, a higher-minded notion of what it means to be a gentleman emerges: to become a man in full, equipped to handle any situation that arises.

In that spirit, we release our bodies, minds, bad habits, and \$1,500 into these women's hands. They have 3 days to make men of us.



A gentleman sportsman does not hook or shoot his friends. Smith largely gets this right, depending on how you define "friends."

+++

STEP 1: MASTER THE ART OF THE FIRST IMPRESSION

The seven other "delegates" (as we are called) joining me hail from five countries and span nearly six decades of unrefined living. The youngest guy is Dietrich, a 24-year-old Aussie living in London, who has the wide eyes and unflappable energy of a Jack Russell terrier. The oldest are Ravinda, 57, from Bombay; and Michael, a computer geek living in the north of England whose wife gave him the course as a 50th-birthday present. To the untrained eye, we don't look like a disaster area needing to be roped off. The sorority of sophisticated ladies at the Finishing Academy, however, is not the untrained eye.

"If you don't look and act appropriately, you have to work that much harder to get what you want in life," says Mather, bubbling with energy like a fizzy bottle of champagne as she instructs us on the importance of image. She is talking about our outward appearance, but the lesson applies to most everything else we learn this weekend: Being a gentleman can help you in every part of life, from self-esteem

TIPS FOR EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN

Questions we all have about dinner parties

I FUMBLE OPENING A BOTTLE—CAN I UNCORK THE WINE BEFORE PEOPLE ARRIVE?

Yes, but reds only. Leave whites unopened in the fridge, because they need to stay cold.

DO I HAVE TO SEAT COUPLES NEXT TO EACH OTHER?

No. In fact, it's better to break up couples at the dinner table, so they not only don't chat just with each other, but also have a chance to make new friends.

WHAT IF I HAVE A VERY SHY GUEST?

Encourage conversation by giving people points of reference—e.g., "Sally, you rescue stray cats, and Tom here has a cat named Mr. Piddles who has six toes."

HOW ABOUT A DRUNKEN GUEST?

Don't embarrass him by loudly proclaiming him soused. Rather, subtly pull him aside, give him a glass of water, suggest that he slow down, and ask him to leave his keys with you.

WHAT WINE GOES WITH BURGERS?

Any inexpensive cabernet will do.

CAN I USE AN ELECTRIC CARVING KNIFE?

No chef would be caught dead in a kitchen with an electric knife, and neither should you. Buy a good carving knife, such as the Wusthof Grand Prix II.

IS AN E-MAIL THANK-YOU NOTE ACCEPTABLE?

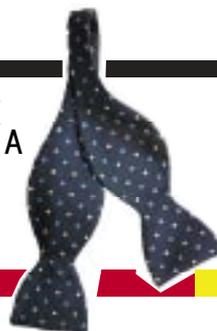
It is not. Send a handwritten note after you've been to someone's home. Phoning is second best.

The Average Guy

PERCENTAGE OF MEN WHO OWN A TUXEDO: 13

PERCENTAGE WHO CAN TIE A BOW TIE: 17

PERCENTAGE OF MEN WHO AREN'T SURE WHAT THEIR SPORT-COAT SIZE IS: 18



to relationships to professional success. "We're teaching you to get rich and get lucky" is the not-so-subtle subtext.

Edge invites me into a hula hoop to demonstrate body language, which she says makes up 93 percent of first impressions. Stand 2 to 3 feet from the person you're talking to, she says. When you shake hands, lightly touch the person's arm with your

TIPS FOR EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN

How to greet her

FIRST MEETINGS WITH WOMEN ARE TRICKY. What to do? Shake hands? Hug? Kiss? Bow? It's a body-language jungle out there, and many of us are lost. "Never kiss on the first meeting," says the Finishing Academy's Diana Mather. "But after you've established a rapport with a woman, note her body language: Does she step in to greet you the next time you meet? Then it's probably time for a kiss. But remember, an air kiss is just that—air—and does not mean anything. The best kiss for a greeting is cheek to cheek. A lady should never feel your wet lips."

other hand for 3 seconds and you have an 80 percent chance of making a good connection; touch it for more than 5 seconds and you come across as patronizing. When talking, look into the other person's eyes. And, she adds, don't talk to a woman's breasts.

Good to know.

+++

STEP 2: APPLY THE RULES OF STYLE

Our days at the academy are peppered with maxims like "you don't get a second chance to make a first impression" and "the best suit is useless if you don't stand and walk in it correctly"—all variations on the same self-improvement-is-a-gift-to-yourself-and-the-world theme. Michaela Jedinak, a pretty fashion consultant suspected of being from Sweden, leads us in an impassioned dissection of what types of clothes are best for each body type.

Short guys: Wear one color to keep your body in one lengthening piece. Tall guys: Break up the body with distinct colors. Fat guys: No stripes. Darker-skinned guys: Wear dark clothes. All guys: Buy bespoke, or custom-made, suits whenever possible.

We're told that among the eight of us, six are wearing their pants too long, which is not only sloppy but also makes shorter men appear shorter still.

During my one-on-one session with Michaela, I grill her about wedding attire; she listens, and then, after 30 minutes of masterful instruction about how I need to go easy on the black, why off-whites will bring out my pretty blue eyes (aw, shucks), and the reason double-breasted suits are not my move, my muse finally says, "But I'd really just ask your fiancée."

+++

STEP 3: SAVOR THE GUSTATORY ARTS

I may be living in a castle, eating rich and delicious Scottish delicacies, and surrounded by acre after acre of pristine land, but this is no gentleman's holiday. The days and nights are packed. Each and every event is an occasion for more instruction.

There's the simple act of serving wine, which many men yearn to master. It seems a little scary, but it's not so hard. Never fill a glass of wine more than halfway, our wine-appreciation instructor explains. (You need to allow the vino room to breathe.) Don't hold a white-wine glass by the bowl. (Your hand warms the wine; this applies to your water glass, too.) And no clinking during a toast! To clink is to risk chipping the fine glassware you're drinking from. And we can't have that.

Meals at the Finishing Academy fill us up with knowledge ("When seated between two women at a dinner party, talk to one woman during the first course and then the other woman during the next course"; "Place your silverware at 5:20 on your plate to indicate that you are finished with the dish"). We pepper our conversation with formal niceties ("You, sir, are too kind") that start off as a goof but become addictive. Turns out, it's as easy to be pleasant and polite as it is to be rushed and rude. Dietrich gets into a habit of beginning every conversation with "My good man," and I surprise myself by not wanting to smack him.



Smith (left) explains that a perfect gentleman never, ever holds a white-wine glass by the bowl.

+++

STEP 4: UNLEASH YOUR INNER FRED ASTAIRE

There's much common ground in what it takes to find success in dancing, golfing, and clay-pigeon shooting: poise, patience, concentration, coordination.

These are not my strengths. The sadists running this show have scheduled not one but two dance sessions. "Scottish Reeling for Fun and Fitness" is led by an insane little Scottish man named Major Mike, kilt and all, who has an endearing way of mocking us even as he teaches us to hop around like bush sprites. And with whom shall we have this dance? Eight local ladies, ages 15 to 65, have been dragged over the hill and into the castle. They're kind of a hoot, and, mercifully, patient and empathetic. I didn't really see the point in Scottish dancing—it's not useful or graceful—but I suppose part of being a Renaissance man is to embrace local customs. Regardless, it's all over in an hour and a half.

Later, I fare better at the foxtrot and the waltz. My fiancée has spent many a wedding

TIPS FOR EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN

How to escape any conversation

1. BE A WHIZ

Explain sheepishly that you need to use the bathroom, and politely excuse yourself.

2. TELL A WHITE LIE

At a break in the action, note that you've enjoyed chatting, but there's someone over on the other side of the room with whom you must discuss something.

3. MAKE AN INTRODUCTION

Bring someone else into your tête-à-tête—then take off once those two are talking.



The Average Guy

NUMBER OF MEN WHO CHECK THE REAR VIEW IN A 3-WAY MIRROR WHEN TRYING ON NEW PANTS:
2 in 5

PERCENTAGE OF THE AVERAGE GUY'S CLOTHING THAT NEVER MAKES IT OUT OF HIS CLOSET: **10**

HOW MUCH THE AVERAGE GUY SPENDS ON CLOTHES EACH YEAR: **\$713**

trying to quash my impulse to pogo during the swing dancing, and if there is one transformation she yearns for, it's in my skills on the dance floor. As Alan Milne, a thin man with a '70s 'stache straight out of a soft-porn flick, whirls his wife around the room and gives us instruction, I realize that despite being one of the worst dancers ever, I can learn the foxtrot and the waltz.

And I do! I do in no small part thanks to the patience of my partner, Nila, the only woman I have ever danced with who lives in a castle (just down the road). Sure, sure, to be human is to embrace a lifetime of learning . . . but when it actually occurs to me that with continued will, there is a way that I, Larry Smith, can become a decent dancer, it's a moment that sticks to my bones.

+++

STEP 5: LEARN TO BE A GOOD SPORT

What does it take to be a better man? Big question, and one addressed all weekend with broad strokes and fine lines.

I think about this as I ponder the 9-iron that's been placed in my hand. I've always been against golf. It seems like a slow, expensive, sad excuse for men to hide from their wives. Then again, I've never actually swung a club. Which is why, then and there, on a beautiful Scottish golf course, I suspend my biases and take lessons. Two hours later, I'm told my stance is excellent, my swing has steadily gone from terrible to a trifle less terrible, and I have learned

TIPS FOR EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN**How to behave like an evolved man at the table**

- 1. NEVER PICK UP A DINNER ROLL AND BITE IT.** Break off one piece of the bread at a time. And no mopping up the red sauce with your roll.
- 2. BRING THE FORK UP TO YOUR MOUTH,** not your mouth down to the plate.
- 3. SOUP'S ALMOST GONE?** Finish it up by tipping the bowl away from you.
- 4. YOU CANNOT ASK FOR SECONDS.** Ever. Sorry.
- 5. DITTO THE HOT SAUCE.** If the host felt the dish needed Tabasco, she would have put it on the table.

this about myself: I derive scant pleasure from whacking a little white ball.

The next afternoon, I find myself on a murky moor with a rifle in my hand, attempting to master the effete pastime of clay-pigeon shooting. Without getting all Dick Cheney here, it does feel great to be in the woods with pals, with a powerful, roaring weapon in my hand. It calls for concentration and a laser-sharp awareness of one's surroundings—parts of my personality I would like to improve. In fact, I'll surely visit the shooting range again. Elderly Republican lawyers, you're on notice.

+++

STEP 6: PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

Everything we have learned leads to The Performance—a final exam in which we sell our new selves to the group in the form of a 5-minute speech. We've been specifically schooled in public speaking with all the various and sundry tips and tricks addressing a crowd demands, but our presentations are a chance to put to work the broader range of skills we've learned.

"You're not actors," says Mather, who was one herself back in the day, "but when you're giving a presentation or speech, you have to be able to entertain. And you! You've got a wedding coming!" she says, her piercing gaze upon me.

Even here, among men who are now mates, I feel the heat. While I wait my turn, I take long inhalations and exhalations, a relaxation technique Mather had suggested earlier that works as advertised. I go last, knowing that Ravinda's perfectly presented, informative presentation on wine, during which he referred to no notes and quoted Oscar Wilde, will be tough to beat. And make no mistake: Every well-balanced, book-on-head-walking, color-coordinated part of me wants to win.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," I begin. "What I am about to tell you could profoundly change your lives. My remarks today are entitled, 'New York Women: Who They Are, Where to Find Them,

and Why They Cannot Wait to Meet You.'" I mean every word I say, finishing it off with a dramatic removal of my fiancée's photo from my wallet. "Gentlemen, I have taken my own advice, which is why this woman will be marrying me in 3 months' time. She is off the market, but there are 4.5 million women left. What are you waiting for?"

Ravinda makes his way over to me. "Yours was the best, my friend," he says, so graciously, so brimming with sincerity and class. Every competitive bone in my body shatters. "But Ravinda, my topic was quite silly. Your history of wine was fascinating, and so beautifully delivered."

"You see, this is what it is, precisely," he says in a manner unmistakably his. "We learn from each other. Alone we are nothing."

Can I continue to hold my fork properly in the months to come? Will I waltz with

TIPS FOR EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN**How to dance without fear**

- 1. RELAX.** It's supposed to be fun. A tense dance partner is worse than a bad one.
- 2. YOU'LL EVENTUALLY GET THE HANG OF IT.** Basic dances like the foxtrot and the waltz require minimal practice. Until comfort clicks in, your best friends are your balance and your sense of control.
- 3. ALWAYS LEAD, NEVER FOLLOW.** She'll thank you.

style at my wedding? I honestly don't know, and I'm not sure how much it matters.

What we learned, most of all, is that etiquette and manners are very different. Good etiquette requires learning specific rules that society deems appropriate. Good manners, however, mean carrying yourself with grace and style and doing everything within your power to make those around you feel comfortable.

Over those 3 days, I began to understand why—and how—these two notions work together. And at that moment, a man who could not be more different from me proved to be the pure embodiment of both. And showed me exactly what it means to be a perfect gentleman. ■

The Average Guy

PERCENTAGE OF MEN WHO SAY THEY DON'T NEED A STYLE MAKEOVER: **87**

NUMBER OF PAIRS OF NONATHLETIC SHOES THE AVERAGE GUY OWNS: **between 5 and 10**

NUMBER OF SECONDS IT TAKES THE AVERAGE GUY TO DECIDE WHAT TO WEAR: **80**

