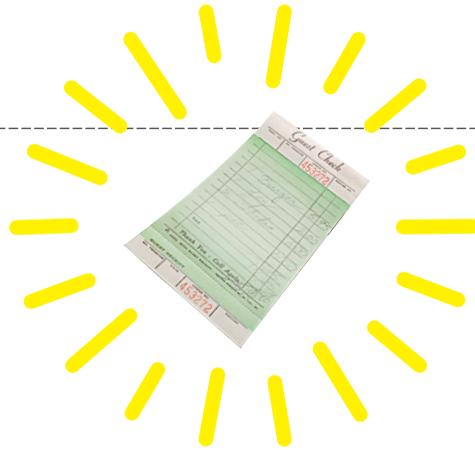


By KRIS FRIESWICK



“Don’t keep a man guessing too long. He’s sure to find the answer somewhere else.”

– MAE WEST

Check Yourself

Even in the post-feminist dating age, when it comes to who pays, some insist that primal instincts still win the day.

You’ve done it. Despite all odds, you’ve just enjoyed that rare event, a great first date. The conversation was stimulating, jokes weren’t dependent upon puns or bodily functions, and he or she looks good from every angle. Then the inevitable moment arrives that can scuttle the most romantic of rendezvous: the arrival of the check. It lies in the center of the table like a leather-clad challenge. Do you pick it up and offer to pay? Do you offer to go Dutch? Or do you just sit there ignoring it, praying your dinner partner will reach first?

Ask 10 women, and it’s likely you’ll find about eight who insist that the inviter (regardless of sex) should pay for the first date, or that first-date couples should go Dutch. This, each will insist, is the modern, feminist, gender-neutral thing to do. Each enlightened heterosexual woman will insist she feels this way right up until her Dream Date suggests that they go Dutch. Then she’ll experience an unexpected yet unmistakable negative shift in her opinion of D.D. She’ll realize these feelings are hypocritical, but that won’t stop her from feeling them. When a man wants to go Dutch, “I feel like he wants to be my friend or doesn’t have the wherewithal to just ‘get it,’” says Kathryn Bernstein, a director at Trader Joe’s in Newton. “I am a completely independent, self-sufficient woman, but I still want to be taken care of. For me, going Dutch is worse than me picking up the entire check.”

Lola’s never exactly been a *Rules* kind of girl. But – gasp – what if we’re hardwired to play by them?

Going Dutch “sends a definite message about how a man feels about me,” says Elizabeth Petersen, a Boston-based technical writer and triathlete. “It’s like opening doors, another thing I’m perfectly capable of doing myself. Some women get offended if a man does; others get offended if a man doesn’t. I don’t get offended, but I definitely notice.”

Experts say that although we all strive toward equality, we are saddled with these latent reactions, remnants of billions of years of conditioning. The truth is that the female of any species gravitates toward a mate who can provide for her and any potential offspring, and society’s desire for gender equality can’t just erase that fact, says Dr. Boyce Watkins, professor at Syracuse University and author of *Financial Lovemaking 101*. Prehistorically, man provided food and shelter to show a woman he was interested. Millennia later, that dynamic is re-enacted at Italian restaurants every Saturday night.

“Paying for the first date is one way to show that there is an allocation of valuable resources to your significant other,” says Watkins. “And let’s face it, I don’t care if you’re a human or a bear in the woods, no female wants to mate with a wimp who can’t provide.”

It’s not just women who insist that men cover the first date costs. Many men willingly, often emphatically, play their prehistoric “role” with pride. “Men don’t want things to be too easy,” says April Masini, a dating advice columnist and author of *Think and Date Like a Man* and a variety of other dating and relationship books. “Men are hunters. When it comes to a relationship, the man needs to pursue the relationship. When it comes to romance, it’s not the same as the boardroom.” Paying for dinner is a man’s way of signaling that the date is romantic, as opposed to platonic, she says. If a woman offers to pay, men feel pursued and the thrill of the hunt evaporates, making a second date unlikely.

For many couples, this dynamic doesn’t

end after the first date or even after marriage – the prehistoric gender role is a hard habit to break. Even for the third of American families in which the wife is the primary breadwinner, both partners frequently drift back into traditional financial roles, especially around other people. Next time you're out to dinner with a married couple, watch who throws down the credit card when the dinner check comes. I'll bet you'd bet that it's the guy. "Most men feel that their job and their earning power equates with their self-worth," says Molly Barrow, a relationship expert, psychologist, and author of *Matchlines: A Revolutionary New Way of Looking at Relationships and Making the Right Choices in Love*. "Women do not equate their self-worth with their income," so letting him play the traditional role, at least in public, is an easy way to preserve his ego, she says.

So why can't everybody get over the archaic gender rules and embrace a new paradigm? You can blame the usual suspects: the media, our parents, and "society," says Barrow, which continue to reinforce the old stereotypes. She says that stronger female role models will, over time, help us break this pattern. "Men will eventually disengage from the money equals power equals self-worth thing, and as they do that females will learn to define their own self-worth differently."

For those who wish to banish their prehistoric side without scaring away dates who haven't yet banished theirs, here's a simple way to navigate the first-date bill issue: Always offer to go Dutch, just like you would with a friend. If your date politely insists that he pay, say thank you and take him up on his offer. If you liked him, tell him that you'll repay his generosity next time (thus playing to his lingering Neanderthal). And if he takes you up on the offer to go Dutch? Just knowing it was your idea will take some of the steam out of your lingering prehistoric disappointment.