

# Cutlery: its origins, uses and its role in society



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Cutlery is defined by [www. dictionary. co. uk](http://www.dictionary.co.uk) as " tableware implements for cutting and eating food", or " The business of a cutler", and a cutler himself is defined by the same source as " One who makes or deals in cutlery, or knives and other cutting instruments".

Cutlery as we understand it now is knives, forks and spoons - sporks, chopsticks and kebabs can also be seen moonlighting in the cutlery arena, though almost all food can be eaten simply with a fork and a spoon, and most food can be eaten with no cutlery at all - I'll address this issue later.

Firstly, the Knife. Knives in their present form evolved from early man's hand-axes, which have been found as early as one hundred and seventy thousand BC. These were initially just pieces of flint, chipped away at with another piece of rock until a sharp edge formed on the flint which could be used to cut. Handles were developed out of fur, bone, wood etc to protect the user's hand, and later when metals were discovered the blade of the axe was formed from these metals. The axe at this time was a universal cutting tool - it could be used to cut wood, animal hides, hack meat from an animal's corpse or even to shave if you're very brave. The knife only developed as an item solely used for eating much later.

A story I found during my research on the Internet is about a French monk, who had a guest who after every meal cleaned the remnants of the meal from his teeth with the sharpened tip of his knife. The monk was disgusted, and ordered that all the tips of the knives be ground down so they were round. This spread and became a fashion among monks in France, and the King at the time even passed a law, to say knives with sharp points were

illegal, and should not be sold. He also passed a decree for all knives currently in use to have their tips ground down, and this spread from France - which is why knives always have round tips, as opposed to sharp tips like on daggers etc.

The Fork is probably the most commonly used item of cutlery these days, as you can eat most things with the fork and it leaves one hand free to do something else with, such as writing, or channel surfing. The fork took some time to be accepted into western society, earliest references being in the bible. There was a scandal about forks in Italy in the 4th century, and it took until the renaissance period for forks to become fully accepted in Europe. By the 1600s it was common for Nobles to eat with forks in England, and from then it spread into the middle and eventually the working classes.

The Spoon is considerably older than the fork, and probably not much younger than the knife. The first spoons were made of the socket part of ball-and-socket joints in animals early men killed for food, and were used to scoop things, like water and earth. Spoons evolved through the ages much like the knife, and have found their place today along with the knife and spoon as the Western eating implements of choice.

Spoons have found a place in modern culture today not only as an eating implement but also as part of the many seemingly 'supernatural' events performed in front of live audiences by magicians. Spoon bending is one of the most popular paranormal activities that can be performed by people, whether in person or via TV. It involves the manipulation of an audience to believe that the magician is bending the spoon with the power of his/her

mind, whereas in fact it is usually done with expert sleight-of-hand. Of course in theory this trick should be possible with most things, though it seems to only be done with spoons. I can think of several explanations:

-Since not as much stress is put on the spoon while eating as on the fork or knife, it tends to have a thinner, less strong neck, so it is easier to quickly grab and bend while the audience is distracted.

-Also spoons tend to have a slight bend in their necks anyway, to produce a comfortable angle of wrist while using the spoon. This allows the magician to wobble the spoon and pretend that it is bending. As long as it is done skilfully it can be quite convincing to the untrained eye.

Spoons have also made a recent appearance in the 1999 film 'The Matrix', where a small boy demonstrates spoon bending the protagonist, Neo, to attempt to make him 'believe'. This attempt is however unsuccessful, as not even the mighty Neo can make the spoon bend purely through force of will.

However cutlery has a wider meaning beyond just eating tools. Cutlery, when broken down surprisingly is found to be made from the word 'cut', so anything that cuts can be called an item of cutlery.

However, for the final part of my address, I'd like to address the issue of fast food. McDonalds, Burger King, KFC etc are all threatening the livelihood of cutlers by providing food which is intended to be eaten with the hands.

Possibly the spoon may survive this onslaught as there remain foodstuffs which would be very difficult to eat without a spoon, but forks and knives are mostly dispensable.

When fast food restaurants first opened, disorientated customers could be seen aimlessly wandering around the place, looking for cutlery with which to eat their grease-caked food. These poor, innocent people had no idea what the fast food principle would go on to become. The lack of cutlery in restaurants led to a decrease in formality at meal-times, which in turn led to the development of TV dinners and takeaways, both of which demean family values and detract from valuable family time spent enjoying a home cooked meal together, using proper cutlery.

But can fast food be blamed for all of the world's problems? Of course not - if it were fast food's fault, then the Americans would have sued by now, so where should we look? That I cannot answer. However, I do know that if cutlery continues to be disrespected in our society, surely the consequences cannot be beneficial to mankind.