



PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES ABRAHAMSON

Cracking the Code

BY WILLIAM GREEN

INVITATION ETIQUETTE: WHAT THEY REALLY WANT YOU TO WEAR

the question of what to wear to a party or event is not something men tend to ponder too deeply or try to answer too far in advance. Those magnificently printed invitations to weddings or gallery openings, those wittily phrased birthday party flyers never get the attention they deserve. The cards lie in state on the mantelpiece or hang askew on the door of the fridge, but we seldom bother to give them a second glance. By the time we get around to checking the tiny letters embossed in the bottom left-hand corner, we are already polishing our Sunday-best shoes and shouting “Where are my cufflinks?” And by then it’s much too late to do anything about a dress code that reads Summer Beige or Tartans and Sporrans.

Your next party is your next date, or at least your next networking opportunity, so dress codes do matter. The grand affairs are simple enough. Most men know that Black Tie means wear your tuxedo, and Semi-Formal means a dark suit. But as the neckties loosen, the codes begin to confuse and even contradict. How do we interpret the bewildering oxymoron of Smart Casual? Is it the same as Elegant Casual or separated by some super-subtle distinction? Can’t we just come as we are?

Emphatically not, says Letitia Baldrige, a writer and authority on manners. She was the White House social secretary when the Kennedys were entertaining there, and the parties they gave are remembered to this day. Good manners, she believes, call for both hosts and guests to be decisive in the matter of dress. There is no more excuse for the invited to be neglectfully attired than there is for ambiguously worded invitations. “In the event, the overdressed will feel like fops, and the underdressed will feel like farmers. If you don’t understand what Smart Casual is supposed to mean, call your host for clarification – and remind him or her that other guests may be as confused as you.”

That is easier said than done. Many stiff-necked men of my acquaintance would rather miss a party entirely than admit to anyone – let alone their host – that they haven’t a clue what tie to wear for tea with the Russian ambassador. So here are a few discreet tips for the advice averse. They should help save you from total entanglement in the etiquette net.

SEEK SAFETY IN THE DARK

Most fashion pundits will agree – if somewhat reluctantly – that a man in a good, well-fitted dark suit can survive nearly any social encounter, from Black Tie Optional through Semi-Formal to Business Attire. Spread-collared shirts, thoughtful ties, the right cufflinks – all these are nothing without a good suit on which to hang them. Back that up with a firm handshake and a ready smile, and you can meet and greet with confidence – from an intimate dinner table for six to a reception hall crush for six hundred.

MORE OR LESS

Overdressed or underdressed – which is the greater evil? Experience teaches most men that showing up in a sweater when everyone else is in a jacket and tie is a more of a threat to self-confidence than the reverse. When in doubt, therefore – or when faced with the dreaded Dress Optional card – the smart party navigator will find safe harbour by steering a degree or two towards the more formal points of the compass. (As the great lexicographer, Dr. Johnson remarked, in 1763, “A man with a good coat upon his back meets with a better reception than he who has a bad one.”) Renowned for its versatility, a classic navy blazer with grey or tan pants and a striped tie almost defines conservative Smart Casual, especially at outdoor occasions. The tie can be discreetly removed if nobody else is wearing one. Marginally less formal, a sports jacket is equally appropriate.

NEVER SLIP INTO SLOPPY

Whenever you hear yourself saying “I’ll wear what I’m wearing,” stop and seek the nearest full-length mirror. Then remind yourself that whether your invitation was marked Casual, Relaxed or Barbecue & Beers, it did not specify Unshaven, Distressed and Dishevelled. Even the most informal summer backyard barbeque deserves an effort on your part, and the fact that a written invitation was extended shows that your hosts are taking the get-together seriously. Camp-style shirts or knits, sport shirts and golf wear are your best options here.

and lastly...

ONLY THE BOLD DESERVE THE FAIR
Confidence comes of knowing yourself and those around you – and most invitations, after all, come from your friends. Parties are supposed to be fun, so why play it safe all the time? A formal occasion, surprisingly, provides the best opportunity for an unconventional (but still irreproachable) flourish. Consider a white dinner jacket for summer or a pale linen suit for a June wedding on a hot, sunny day. Choose your moment for extravagance, and choose it well. You may be surprised by the success it brings you. ☺



READING BETWEEN THE LINES

BLACK TIE

A tuxedo; a white, French-cuffed tuxedo shirt; a bow tie and a cummerbund or vest; a white silk square or a white linen handkerchief in the breast pocket (optional); black socks; black patent leather shoes. A white dinner jacket with black trousers is perfectly acceptable on a summer night.

BLACK TIE OPTIONAL

Many men view this as a welcome opportunity to wear Black Tie. A formal navy blue or black suit with a white French-cuffed dress shirt and an elegant tie is really the only Optional option.

SEMI-FORMAL/ELEGANT ATTIRE

No chance to sport your tuxedo here. The safest bet is to wear a navy blue or black suit with a dress shirt and tie.

BUSINESS ATTIRE

Never mind if you actually conduct your business from a home office wearing a dressing gown, this instruction means a suit, a dress shirt and tie.

SMART CASUAL/ELEGANT CASUAL

Originally intended to offer guests freedom of choice, these vague commands have caused much confusion over the years. Today, a consensus seems to have been reached: wear a jacket. It might be a blazer or a sports jacket, it could be conservatively dark or downright dashing, but a jacket is a must. What you put with it is more open to interpretation. No need for a tie, unless you enjoy wearing one. Grey or tan-coloured trousers are always correct; light-coloured cotton or linen pants can also look great provided they're well coordinated. Shirts can range from a button-down collar to a polo-collared knit. Add an interesting pair of loafers, a braided belt or a pocket square to finish off your look.