

In the interests of good friendship and hassle-free dining, Eugene Yiga makes a plea for separate bills

# The bill, please

**E**at, drink, and be merry. That's easy when you're at a nice restaurant with good friends. But when the bill comes, hours of happiness can turn into something harder to swallow. We've all been there. So what should we do?

The first option is for everyone to pay their fair share. Because there's no such thing as a free lunch, nobody should have to subsidise anybody else's food. But splitting a lengthy bill can be complicated, especially at a big table with many still buzzing from the booze and barely able to read the tiny text, let alone remember who had what.

And then there are the times when everyone swipes their cards or puts down some cash, only to realise the money is short. After nervous looks around the table to figure out who's being cheap, someone has to pay extra to make up for the shortfall. Either that or the waiter has to live with a tiny tip. End result? Misery all round.

The second option is to split the bill equally. This is the quickest and easiest way. And if you go out with the same people over and over again, it works out fine in the long term. But this approach isn't fair! The

people on a diet, physical or fiscal, end up paying for their overindulgent friends.

Worse, a 2004 study in *The Economic Journal* found that splitting the bill

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can cause people to spend twice what they normally would. That's because it encourages people to order more expensive items with the knowledge that they won't have to pay for them in full. Unfortunately, if everyone tries to do this, the result is a

culinary prisoner's dilemma, where the group is worse off than they would have been had they cooperated upfront. Wallets are empty and tummies may hurt. End result? Misery all round.

Fortunately, there's a third option that combines the fairness of paying for what you eat with the simplicity of splitting evenly: give everyone their own bill! Whenever more than one person sits down in a restaurant, the waiter could ask upfront if they want separate bills. Each person would then be given a number, which could possibly be on the back of their seat, in case they forget. As the orders are taken, the waiter would just make a note of which number ordered what item. For things like a bottle of wine, they'd make a note that it was for the whole table, or just for numbers two and three, those darn boozers.

Yes, this method does preclude the possibility of one person opting to pay for both if they're on a date, but apparently chivalry died ages ago, so there's no need to worry about killing it now. And yes, it could be a bit of an administrative schlep, but if we have the technology to measure the temperature of another planet's moon, I'm sure we can do this too. Friendships everywhere are at stake. 