

I am a man of simple pleasures - so, when settling into New York in March 2010, would go to the deli nearest to my apartment and ask for a cheese and tomato sandwich. (Glamorous Carrie Bradshaw me: not.) The second component of the sandwich always got a “Whaaat?” or puzzled squint of the eye. “Tomato” did not seem an especially complicated word. But three weeks of “Whaaats” and wary squinting broke me. One day I tentatively asked for “cheese and tomay-doh” and was rewarded with a briskly made sandwich.

We say “tom-ahh-toe”, they say “tomay-doh” and so you don’t end up calling the whole thing off, just go with “tomay-doh” and learn a valuable lesson. Do New York New York’s way. Shine in your chosen field, be a renegade, ballbuster, fashionable gadfly, but don’t try to defy the city’s slipstream. It isn’t charming. You’re just holding people up. It will always beat you, schmuck.

“Tomaydoh-gate” was only the start. Do not make way for people on the sidewalk (forget being quaint and saying “pavement”, you’re not Kate Winslet): someone coming the other way will charge into you and it will be your fault. Be prepared for the astonishing street-noise: people screaming, shouting, breaking up, or – as I heard a few hours ago – telling their boss to fuck off. New Yorkers express themselves constantly. Their instinct is to outsmart and outquip. They want the first word and last word: everything in the middle is blah. They’re the best people for reporters to vox-pop. They’ve been waiting to offer their opinion for, oooo, all of two minutes. They look at me with my “pleases” and “thank yous” and slightly too earnest “Have a good day” (New Yorkers say, “Have a good one”) and probably think, “Would Little Lord Fauntleroy kindly shift his ass?”

Ask for a “check” in restaurants, not “bill” and pretend to be all bumbling about your mistake. Don’t ask too disapprovingly about what tip you should leave. Yes, it’s a different to Britain and more. Always leave two dollars for the barman. But don’t run too scared, because New Yorkers, hardened crags of urban distemper they may be, have a soft spot for us. I’d been coming for nearly twenty years before moving here and thought first – 1993 – they found us charming in our paleness and odd sticky-outy bodies, our innate lack of New York chops. In the early 2000s we definitely became just one other ingredient of the melting pot. But now it’s like Hugh Grant has landed, tweaking his ruffled hair, all over again.

Simply, they're enchanted by the accent: even worldly, jaded New Yorkers go all posh – “Laahhhvly to meet you” – to meet our posh.

See their delight over tea, toast and Marmite at the British Tea and Sympathy shop and café, or fish and chips from A Salt and Battery, or sausage rolls from Myers of Keswick. There are lots of British-themed restaurants, even in the latest hot Brooklyn 'hood, Bushwick. Downton Abbey is insanely popular: at Christmas I was begged to “do some Downton” (at least I think that's what I was being asked) at a dinner party. I also introduced the table to clips of Peggy Mitchell in EastEnders, leading to the delicious spectacle of a group of Manhattan homosexuals trying to perfect the best “Getouttamahhhhpaaahhb”. (They all could only manage “pooob” not “pahhb”.)

Yes British gays, by not saying anything remotely interesting – “Glass of red, please”, “Um, not sure about that” – you will have the hottest guys in the bar cooing over your “charming” accent. You will feel a fraud: “I was just expressing surprise you weirdos,” you'll think, but here the boys are, moths to a flamer. You will win the karaoke even if you are flatter than Russell Crowe in Les Mis. In my local, XES in Chelsea, two Texans recently wanted me to teach them “like, some English” and in five minutes, a modern-day Henry Higgins in T-shirt and jeans, I had them practising, “I can't wait to see the new Harry Potter” over and over again, thrilled to soon sound passably Home Counties albeit with a Houston twang. Be ready for what I call “lazy ear”. Something happens between us saying something and Americans hearing it, especially in a bar or club: order a Cosmopolitan and be prepared for beer. American brains are resistant to non-American accents. Also, a “gin and tonic” or “vodka-tonic” is not specific enough: a barman will ask what brand you want and be puzzled by a British “Oh, whatever you've got, love” wave of a hand. Oh, gin queens: nowhere has Gordon's, it's always bloody Tanqueray.

If you are from anywhere “regional” do not be offended by even intelligent people looking strickenly at you. Mancunians, Brummies, the Welsh and Scottish are frequently asked if they are from Australia or South Africa, the default countries for any American struggling with a British accent that isn't RP or scuffed-London, which they hear on detective shows. Don't sigh: the same people take great pride in having never visited the middle of their own country. They may also profess a love for Keeping Up Appearances, which many Americans love, and Doc Martin.

Given these conditions, you'd think "dating" would be peachy for the single Brit. No, it's hell: Americans' idea of "dating" is baffling. You can be dating many, but not sleeping with one. You can be dating someone who suddenly disappears and still apparently dating them when they reappear a month later, revealing they are still in love with their ex-boyfriend and surprised when you don't want to "date" them any more. I thought years of 90210 and Melrose Place would have prepared me for this, but no. New York's mystifying social and dating mores both have a zinging snobbery and point-scoring element (over jobs, apartments, friends, that article in the New Yorker or New York Times everyone seems to *love* or *hate*) that's icky to an Englishman.

Habitually accused of snootiness ourselves we have nothing on the wise-asses at your Manhattan supper table, where flowing conversation is substituted for smarts, quips and precision questioning around your relationship status, career, salary, apartment, which restaurants you love and what play you last saw (if it was Jersey Boys pretend it was *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*). What did you last see at the Met? "Oh gaaad, the High Line's too busy now"... It's a minefield even your British accent cannot help you negotiate. Gulp your wine, say something snarky about Mayor Bloomberg's attempts at Spanish and dream of getting back to the comforts of your deli's cheese and tomay-doh sandwich.