

# DIVA

NOVEMBER 2011  
10 AED

HUDA, MONA  
AND ALYA KATTAN  
**THE COOLEST  
SISTERS IN TOWN**

**LOOK FABULOUS,  
FEEL AMAZING!  
THE SECRETS TO  
YOUR BEST  
WORKOUT EVER**

**ETIQUETTE  
AND EDUCATION**  
A LOOK INSIDE  
SWITZERLAND'S  
LEADING  
FINISHING SCHOOL

**SPRING FASHION PREVIEW  
BEST IN SHOW FROM PARIS**



Viviane Néri, Philippe and Rosemary McCallum (Senior Etiquette and Protocole Teacher)

# THE ART OF FINISHING FIRST

An in-depth look at Switzerland's Institut Villa Pierrefeu, a finishing school with visions of a different, better future, for culture and society.

By Mirna Fares  
Photos credit: Nicolas Jutzi



**E**legant, exclusive, and charming. Three attributes that the Institut Villa Pierrefeu (IVP), Switzerland's leading finishing school, embodies, practices and has earned over years of excellence in education. What began as a privately run family school by Mme Dorette Faillettaz in 1954, Institut Villa Pierrefeu has grown to become one of the world's most recognized and successful centers for a "finishing" education. Today, Mme Dorette Faillettaz is succeeded by her daughter Viviane Néri and grandson Philippe. With many years of experience, Viviane and Philippe do an incredible job at constantly restructuring the Institut and discovering new and exciting ways to accommodate ever-changing lifestyles and cultures. All the while maintaining the traditions and principles that the Institut was established on. The Institut Villa Pierrefeu continues to offer prospective students the opportunity to develop key skills for future careers in the business world and society through a multitude of rigorous, practical, and highly effective programs. Whether it be in a one to three term school year program, a winter intensive program, a summer international etiquette and protocol program, or a custom built program for institutional or private clients, the Institute provides extensive courses such as: International Etiquette and Protocol, Table Service and Decoration, Home Management, Personal Presentation, Cooking, and Ballroom Dancing, to help build and promote expertise and understanding of our multi-cultural world and customs. In addition to mastering the art of sophisticated global communication, the Institut Villa Pierrefeu's students are encouraged to set their own creativity free. The environment, intimate and picturesque, further enhances the ultimate IVP experience, as evidenced by the school's admirable global recognition and impressive network of alumni. Herewith, a conversation with the man with all the charm, Philippe Néri...

## How did the Institut Villa Pierrefeu come to be?

To set the picture, my grandmother created Pierrefeu just before manners went out of fashion; women were burning their bras and suddenly femininity was unfashionable. To add to the difficulty, she was recently divorced with two daughters to look after. In a few words, she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. But she was not afraid of a challenge so she decided to go forward with her vision and went to see the banker for credit. In those days bankers did not trust a woman's business sense so they refused. My grandmother would not take no for an answer though, and a few days later she laid the base for Pierrefeu.

## What was the vision for the Institut Villa Pierrefeu?

My grandmother's vision was simple. Since the end of the second world war, women were forced to work, to look after their house and children, and manage to be the perfect spouse, all while keeping their sanity. So, Pierrefeu became a toolbox, which would provide women with the necessary training to juggle all of their life responsibilities.

## How was Pierrefeu received?

At that time, there were two types of "finishing schools":

Anglo-Saxon: The typical image of this is that of a woman walking with a book on her head. The curriculum was mostly based on social graces (how to walk, talk, get out of cars, makeup, ...) and this image is still the one engraved in the mind of the media.

Germanic: Here, the woman is the boss of her "company", basically the house, staff (if any) and her family. This company, is run like a small business. It is very practical and quite a different approach from the previous model. For my grandmother, she needed to mix both models. The training had to be practical, help build confidence in oneself, whether you're behind the oven or at a cocktail party, and promote femininity. Yes, my grandmother realized long ago that a woman is more powerful in a men's world when she remains feminine. I guess it leaves a lasting impression on a man's brain. But if we look at real life examples,

Benazir Bhutto, Queen Noor of Jordan or Aung San Suu Kyi, one can see that it works very well for a woman to be feminine with a greater sense of self-empowerment.

## What has changed at Pierrefeu since your grandmother's time?

When my mother took over the school, she started adding the international multi-cultural curriculum. We worked hard at creating our own books to explain a culture as not from another cultural point of view, but through filters we use to analyze the non-spoken part of a discussion. For example, when a Swiss meets a Russian from St. Petersburg, they look alike, they believe that they think alike but in reality whilst the Swiss thinks very straight and square, the Russian is more Asian in his way of thinking. Another example concerns negotiating contracts: for a Swiss the signature of a contract means that all points are now defined but for the South American it means we are now in business, lets start negotiating the conditions. When I arrived at the school after having worked for a multi-national bank, I decided to focus on what made us so different from any other finishing school and subcontract all other non-key activities. In other words, we would put all of our energy into the international etiquette and protocol side of the curriculum whilst leaving courses such as language to our partners. As a result, we now have the following clients in attendance: During the school year, girls between the ages of 17 and 20, usually in their "gap year", the year between high school and university, take a curriculum that is varied and busy with 40 hours of classes per week. For the summer course, we decided to place all of the etiquette and protocol of the school year into six weeks, plus add a few more cross-cultural courses, but discard the language and other extracurricular classes. As a result, this program attracts mostly women in their mid twenties (at university or having finished university); women in their mid thirties, who are either sponsored by their company or who decide that they are at a key point in their career and that such an education will make a difference; and women in their fifties, who want to return to an active lifestyle, after their children have left their homes. At Pierrefeu we believe in teaching about international culture but also living it. We therefore have a nationality quota as we want the students to share their cultural experiences outside of the classroom, and on other cultural issues that would not normally be covered in the classroom. We've received the following, comments and feedback from our alumni, time and time again: The best experience of their life; It allowed them to build an international network of friends; They use what they've learned day after day; It gave them the confidence to start their own business and/or be an efficient housewife and a considerate hostess.

## How has the finishing school market changed in recent years?

As manners came back into fashion, a myriad of people have seen it as a business opportunity and have decided to re-invent themselves as etiquette consultants. They focus mostly on children's etiquette and dining etiquette with a very American way of doing things. They promise parents that within an afternoon they are will transform their little devil into a little princess. This contributes to the "Anglo-Saxon" image of etiquette. The main difference with our institute is that we are education driven (lessons, tests, exams) and not in "showbiz" or providing "instant coffee" solutions.

## What are some of the difficulties you face in selling your program?

Our best promoters are our alumni. As a result, our clients learn of the Institut through word of mouth. Contrary to what most people believe, it isn't parents who choose to send their daughter to our school but the girl herself who has insisted on coming or was convinced by someone in her family telling her how much she enjoyed her own stay at IVP. Unless you have worked and made costly cultural mistakes, it takes time to see the value in what we teach. The reality is that a university degree is like a key to open the door for your future employment but

once you are there, you realize you have to work with “people” often from very different cultures and this is where IVP makes a difference. However some countries are not aware that such an education exists as they have more than 50 years of communism behind them. There the theory was that refined manners were a “bourgeois” idea, not to be used in their new world and society. So for the moment we have only had very few students from countries like Russia or China.

**There seems to be a social stigma that finishing schools, or charm schools, are an old fashioned concept for socialites and debutantes to attend before marriage. How does the Institut stay up to date and modern?**

There was a time when the finishing school was a place where you would send your daughter unable or disinterested in going to university and where she would learn how to become a good spouse. Once again, this is a very Anglo-Saxon view, which is kept alive by the media wanting to get quick mass attention. The market has the advantage of being more intelligent than the mass media and cleans itself out. As a result, the schools that do not know how to evolve with their time have died. My grandmother was a practical visionary. She had no intention of seeing her students walk with a book on their head but she wanted them to follow the path they wanted with open eyes and all adequate tools possible. Never taking things for granted is the motto of entrepreneurship. The topic we teach evolves, the students change, and the way that we present them with content is also evolving. If you want to stay attractive, and alive, you must be able to mix the good points of tradition with the interesting ones of the present.

**Who would you say is an ideal candidate for finishing school?**

For our finishing school, the best candidate is a woman who has realized that throughout life you deal with people and though the world becomes more of a globalized one, the cultural differences become more important because many people think they exist less and less. Usually these women are 18 or older, are well-travelled, and at the beginning of their career. One day, the father of a student told me: When the economy goes well, anybody can sell! As times become difficult it is the understanding of one another’s culture which will help seal the deal. Each and every course we offer at the Institut caters to different candidate needs and ambitions. There really is something for everyone.

**Do you think finishing schools are making a comeback? Do you think today’s woman is concerned enough with, or prioritizing learning etiquette and social graces appropriately?**

The idea of good manners is making a comeback and funnily enough, not through parenting but from the children themselves. Knowing about etiquette is for life. Just like knowing traffic rules of a specific city: it keeps you alive and the system running without any accidents. I believe that today’s world focuses on the quick fix and the superficial or the visible side of the iceberg (clothes, beauty products, ...). Good manners are a way of living and it means exchanging the old habits for new ones. This takes time and stamina. Just as you cannot keep the weight off by yoyo dieting, you cannot say that when I am in public I eat the right way but at home I can relax. The reality is that the day you eat with a client, your mind will focus on other important points of the discussion and not on how to eat correctly. The solution is to do it right all the time so that it becomes automatic, as is the case with all manners.

**How does the Institut prepare women for a role in our fast changing society and world?**

Etiquette is an evolving topic. The school keeps up-to-date with the changes in society through its network of alumni. But as changes happen, we also remind them that things are not the same between generations, even within their own culture. What is the most rewarding for our team is to see a student blossom as she gains confidence in herself. This is not perceived through clothes or makeup but how much she

“shines – energy” when she comes into the room. Another key point of teaching cross-cultural etiquette is to open our eyes to other worlds, opportunities, and cultural riches.

**What fields, industries, or professions do alumni work in upon graduating from the Institut?**

With more than 3500 alumni, we cover a lot of industries. There do not seem to be any clear trends. A lot of our alumni set up their own companies, some work within their family businesses, while others are busy raising a family. Logical professions however would be the ones in which you have to deal with other parties at an international and sophisticated level.

**What skills does a graduate of one of the Institut’s programs learn?**

**How are those skills applied to everyday work and life?**

Our students acquire self-confidence dealing with and in an international world, whether at home, at the office or at a party. Once again, we deal with people (clients, co-workers, family) so the skills are used on a permanent basis.

**What are the future plans and aspirations for the Institut Villa Pierrefeu?**

The difficulty of a school is that it is a mix of many ingredients and unlike products it cannot be easily replicated. The ingredients are the management, the team, the teachers, the environment... The aspiration for IVP is to keep teaching our specialties to a limited amount of students so that we can focus on the quality of teaching and practical exercises. A parallel could be drawn between a mechanical watch and a tourbillon watch.

**In terms of etiquette, how late is fashionably late? Is being fashionably late ever really fashionable?**

When deciding what time you will arrive at an event, reception, party, function, meeting or whatever, first forget the word fashionable and replace it with “is it possible or impossible” to arrive late. Secondly, think about the type of event. If it is an official function (impossible to be late), best to be early and at the very least arrive at the time the invitation states. If it is a business meeting (again, impossible to be late) always arrive on time; your professional reputation is at stake. If you are invited to a social event like a dinner party in a private home you must understand based on the culture you are exposed to. In the French speaking part of Switzerland (possible to be late) you can give the host/hostess a 15 minute grace period, giving him/her a little extra time to finish any last minute preparations they might have taken on for your pleasure. However, in the German speaking part of Switzerland, if the invitation is for 19:00 arrive at 19:00. Your host will be ready for you, so you should be ready for them. In the rest of the world time has many definitions. For example in the Middle East, Latin America, India and some Asian countries like the Philippines it is possible to arrive late at a private dinner in someone’s home. Unless otherwise stated on the invitation, you are expected to be late, so if invited for 20:00 you are not expected to arrive before 21:00 or even 22:00. The host and hostess may not even be at home if you arrive any earlier. At official functions guests of honor are the last to arrive and all the other guests are expected to be ready and waiting to greet them. So perhaps we can use the term “fashionably” late loosely in this case. It is never fashionable to not show up if you have accepted an invitation, and certainly not fashionable to be uninformed of proper timing. Always ask if you are unsure what time you are really expected. And when visiting a foreign country never assume you know all the answers, inform yourself beforehand.

**What characteristic (s) do you admire most in a woman?**

The motivation to improve and a sense of humor.

**What skill do you admire most in a woman ?**

When she can make any task she undertakes look enjoyable and

effortless.

**In developing her self-image, what is the biggest fashion mistake a woman can make?**

Not being physically or mentally comfortable in her clothes, wearing clothes that pinch or restrict her movements, and wearing clothes that don’t make her want to stand up straight and help her feel proud of who she is and what she represents. Probably the biggest mistake of all would be to think she will never make fashion mistakes or not being able to have a good laugh when she does so.

**What is the biggest beauty mistake a woman can make?**

Believing beauty is something external. And that it has nothing to do with hygiene and cleanliness also.

**What are some major etiquette faux pas?**

Making others feel out of place, uncomfortable or ashamed; Trying too hard; Making assumptions; Being afraid to ask questions; Not taking responsibility; Not showing respect for what you don’t yet know or understand. If you don’t have perfect table manners, but you show genuine interest in the people you meet, you are probably much better off than having perfect dining skills and being a tiresome, self-centered bore.

**Is the best way to drink tea pinkie up?**

It is best to tuck your pinkie in when holding a tea cup with a delicate handle, but if it unintentionally lifts up when balancing the cup it would not be seen as a faux pas. However, if you are sticking your pinkie up intentionally, then it probably suggests that you are being a misinformed snob.

**What skills or attributes must come naturally, or be inherent to a woman ?**

Readiness to help solve misunderstandings and problems.

**What in your opinion characterizes an ideal night of entertaining?**

An ideal night means knowing what you are capable of. If you can organize a sit down dinner for 100 or 1000 guests, with delicious food, efficient service, stunning decorations, entertainment that each guest can enjoy and you yourself can enjoy, then by all means host a party like that. If you can’t cook or aren’t sure how to set a table but have always been commended on your choice of restaurants, invite your guests out. The idea is taking on what you are capable of so that you the hostess, can enjoy yourself and the company of your guests.

**What is the best gift a woman can give ?**

The best gift to give would be one with the recipient in mind, understanding her/his culture, her/his interests, to give pleasure and not create discomfort.

**What is the best gift a woman can receive?**

Something that can help her achieve her ideals.

**Who is someone (living or dead) that you feel embodies/embody outstanding etiquette ?**

Empress Farah of Iran

**Is it impolite to wear white to a wedding when you are attending as a guest ?**

If the bride is wearing white, the idea is not to compete with her, it is her day after all! But there are many shades of white.

**What is the worst thing a woman could do during a meal ?**

Make a phone call at the table, criticize the food, the décor, the service, the hosts and the guests.

**No home is complete without...**

hospitality

**Every woman should own...**

up her to life and face it.

**A woman should never leave the house without ...**

self respect ■

