

A kiss is not just a kiss

When the alcohol's flowing and the clock strikes 12, it's time to pucker up for that annual free-for-all, but hold on: There's an etiquette involved, including who, how long and how hard

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The countdown's complete and Auld Lang Syne is doing its thing. The party has erupted into a cacophony of horn-tooting and whistle-blowing. Everybody's wearing dopey hats and kissing everybody else. It's an alcohol-enabled free-for-all.

Or is it? Believe it or not, there's an unwritten protocol surrounding that most iconic of holiday moments: the Midnight Kiss on New Year's Eve. It covers everything from who to kiss first to how much pressure to apply and how to ward off unwanted embraces.

Steeped as it is in lore and tradition, the New Year's Eve kiss can be loaded with meaning, experts say. It can signal either the beginning or the end of a relationship.

"New Year's Eve is about sharing happiness with loved ones, about getting off to a good start. It doesn't matter if you're alone or in a couple, that anticipated kiss at midnight has a certain magic to it," said Andrea Demirjian, New York-based author of the bestselling book *Kissing* (Berkley Trade, \$14).

Bartender Sheila Mofford, who has been kissed by countless strangers while working New Year's Eves in Montreal, said the mood is always festive. And midnight is especially sweet.

"It is always joyful and happy. Of course people are drunker than ever, but they are laughing and being silly, not inappropriate," said Mofford, who works at Jimbo's Comedyworks on Bishop St. "Even people who come alone get swept up in the magic of it."

But Hratch Wanian, a Montreal party promoter who will be attending a New Year's Eve party at Tribe Hyper Club in Old Montreal, says there's no obligation to kiss everybody.

"I just kiss who I know, or who I want to kiss," he said.

"In a big venue with 1,000 other people who've been drinking for hours, things could get pretty wild. Montreal has a reputation for its New Year's Eve parties. People come from all over for them."

Fun as it is, experts say the set-up to the midnight kiss should never be left to chance. Here's this from clubplanet.com, in its list of New Year's Eve dos and don'ts:

"Classic rookie mistake: people get drunk too easily, lose track of their friends and then at 11:54 realize they're five-deep at the bar waiting to order a drink. Don't fall into this trap. Instead get your Champagne glass at 11:30, stick with your friends and make sure you have someone to kiss at midnight."

If you are at a party without a date, the advisers say, plan ahead by sizing up the crowd and zeroing in on who you want to kiss first at midnight. Then position yourself.

It's true there's more permissiveness and fewer inhibitions around the holidays, what with the mistletoe tradition and free-flowing alcohol. But there are limits.

Michael Christian, who wrote the book *The Art of Kissing* (St. Martin's Press, \$13.95) under the pen name William Cane, said the zeal of New Year's Eve can lead to mixed messages and lingering awkwardness. In other words, be careful how you kiss the boss or the neighbour's wife.

"If you're pulling the person toward you, kissing them full on the mouth in a prolonged fashion, the recipient may get the wrong idea," Christian said in an interview from New Jersey, where he will be spending New Year's Eve at home with his wife and 2-month-old daughter.

"The difference between a romantic and a platonic kiss is in the duration, the intensity and the proximity."

Why such a big deal over such a cliché moment?

The New Year's Eve kiss stems from the ancient European practice of driving evil spirits away from the fledgling New Year. According to German and English folk beliefs, special significance is attached to the first person one encounters in the New Year. There's even an old superstition that failing to kiss someone at midnight is an omen of a year's worth of loneliness. (That might explain the results of a recent survey conducted for an American mouthwash manufacturer that found that six per cent of Americans are planning to kiss their cats when the clock strikes midnight.)

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When you want to pucker up ...

Here are a few etiquette tips from experts for puckering up come midnight New Year's Eve:

- Couples at a party should keep their midnight kiss short and simple to avoid embarrassing or offending other people at the party, says Leah Ingram, author of *The Everything Etiquette Book: A Modern Guide to Good Manners* (Adams Media Corporation, \$19.95). Or as Kissing author Andrea Demirjian puts it: "Keep the long, quivery sexy stuff for after the party."

- However, you should never, ever give a perfunctory kiss to a loved one at midnight on New Year's Eve. Unless you mean it. Christian says it doesn't take much to make a statement with a kiss.

"Like failing to remember a birthday, giving a half-hearted to a partner on New Year's Eve will be seen as a reflection of how you feel," he said. "It has more significance than just about any other kiss of the year."

- As a single person at a party, let friends and fellow partiers kiss their

respective partners first. "Come midnight there's a hierarchy to who gets kissed and in what order," Demirjian said in a telephone interview.

- Gauge the other person's body language before lunging. Remember that not everybody's into full-frontals with complete strangers.

"Although some people may enjoy being kissed by strangers, you always run the risk of insulting that person with your forward behaviour," warns American etiquette expert Valerie Roberts.

- For non-romantic kisses, stick with the A-Frame. That's the basic, trouble-free kissing posture recommended by kissing coach Michael Christian. It goes like this: The kissers touch lips briefly, but keep their hips and feet at a distance. "It prevents body parts from touching that would signal romantic interest," Christian explained.

- Be polite, but there isn't a better night for taking chances. Go for it if you see someone who catches your fancy, Demirjian encourages. Give a wink and a smile, then plant a good one, but make sure it's sweet and friendly, not naughty. "It's got to be quick. And no tongue," she cautions.

And when you don't

If you'd rather opt out, here are some ways to do so.

- How to diplomatically avert an unwanted mouth-to-mouth kiss? Demirjian suggests quickly turning your head and letting the other person's lips meet your cheek. "It's an easy way out," she says. "And nobody's feelings get hurt."

- What if you really don't fancy the guy who just kissed you and then lingers? Smile and be friendly. Then excuse yourself to find a friend or reapply your makeup. He'll get the hint.

- Use fancy footwork to ward off unwanted advances by more unsavoury characters. A drunken, mushy, bear-hugging neighbour charging toward you? Protect your comfort zone.

"Stick your right foot out and extend your hand stiffly, setting up a buffer zone," Toronto image consultant Roz Usher recently suggested in an interview with the Toronto Star. "For full blockage, grab both his upper arms and say, "Don't you look good."

- Germaphobes who eschew all form of intimate physical contact with strangers can stick to air kissing. To do so, just kiss the air at the side of the receiver's cheek, making a brief smacking noise. (Just so you know, though, casual kissing isn't much worse than hand-shaking when it comes to transmitting viruses.)

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