



# MENU

## *Wine Selection*

DOMAIN CARNEROS BRUT, NAPA VALLEY, CA 2001  
*Lotus Spring Cabernet, Sonoma, CA 2000*  
KUNDE MERLOT, SONOMA, CA 2000  
*Landmark Chardonnay, Sonoma, CA 2001*

## *Dinner Menu*

FRESHLY BAKED SONOMA BREADS, SWEET BUTTER  
*Cheese Caesar salad with sourdough croutons & dry villa jack cheese*  
SEARED TENDERLOIN OF BEEF WITH WILD MUSHROOMS,  
*Capellini onions & pine nuts*  
ROASTED SALMON WITH SOY & GINGER GLAZE  
*Sliced oven roasted potatoes*  
SEASONAL FRESH VEGETABLES

## *Dessert*

TRIPLE SORBET WITH SEASONAL BERRIES

## *Wedding Cake*

CHOCOLATE CHIFFON CAKE FILLED WITH CHOCOLATE FUDGE,  
*Covered in a chocolate buttercream*  
ALMOND BASED CAKE WITH BRANDY APRICOT, CHERRIES & PISTACHIOS  
*Gourmet coffee & tea selection*

The menu sets the tone for the meal to come. Key words, like geographic names, cooking techniques and sensory descriptions, trigger mental expectations.

# Word OF MOUTH

Menu descriptors are the ultimate cues for flavor expectation, so choose them wisely

BY DEBORAH GROSSMAN

Creating delicious food and describing it in words are two very different skill sets, and not all food professionals have both. Some chefs write novels in their spare time. Others pulled kitchen duty to avoid English homework. Whatever the chef's attitude on wordsmithery, menus can spell business success or failure.

Strategies that improve menu messages can result in increased sales. The wording on the menu — overall tone, level of formality and style of description — allows management to market the restaurant to the appropriate mix of diners and cultivate repeat customers. Well-organized menus lead to efficient order processing and add-on sales. Descriptive words on the menu play a key operational role by facilitating communication among server, kitchen staff and diner.

## ULTIMATE SALES TOOL

Diners expect menus to be mouth-wateringly readable. They want to be tantalized and fed, not forced to memorize names of local lettuce farmers, master a short course in Italian or marvel at the symbolism of “Ants Climbing a Tree,” as a classic Sichuan noodle dish is sometimes described.

Dr. Brian Wansink has studied the sales potential of menu vernacular for six years at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and at the Food and Brand Lab at

Cornell University. His results prove that the way menus are written directly impacts expectations for the meal.

“Except in extreme cases, we taste what we think we will taste,” writes Wansink in “Mindless Eating” (Random House, 2006). In his study at the Bevier Cafeteria at the University of Illinois, Wansink added one- or two-word descriptors to six food items and rotated the menus. For example, one week the cafeteria offered Succulent Italian Seafood Fillet; two weeks later the same item reappeared at the same price but was called Seafood Fillet.

Menu items with additional descriptor words created a jump of over 25 percent in sales and were rated as more appealing and tastier than those without descriptors.

## QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ The menu's critical role in marketing a restaurant and building sales
- ▶ How menu descriptors affect customers' perceptions of food and preparation
- ▶ Ways to make the menu accessible to diners in any part of the country

Delving deeper into the survey data, Wansink found that the more detailed descriptors also influenced attitudes about the restaurant.

“With the descriptors, some diners thought the chef studied cooking in Europe,” says Wansink, an expert in consumer behavior with a background in nutrition. He emphasizes the psychology of “confirmation bias” in decision-making.

“When faced with food choices, what we taste is influenced by what we read. What is more appealing,” he asks, “calf thymus or sweetbreads? Fish eggs or caviar?”

### CONSIDER THE AUDIENCE

With so much at stake, it’s easy to see where menu writing can get bogged down. It’s important to recognize basic cultural norms, like knowing that mainstream America prefers not to think about eating specific anatomical parts, and it pays to know the demographic makeup of your diners.

In other words, write the menu for your diners, advises Suvir Saran, co-owner and chef of Dévi, a gourmet Indian restaurant in New York City. That seems obvious, but how many menus have you read that seem designed to appeal less to diners than to other chefs, full of fancy cooking techniques, obscure ingredient references or just too much information?

Saran discovered that a mix of authentic Indian words and American translations of his cuisine works best as a marketing tool on the menu at Dévi and in his consultancy work with Sodexo corporate-dining services.

“Our guests touch every level of the workplace and are limited by budget, by life experience, their sense of adventure or need for familiarity,” notes Saran.

Diners familiar with Indian cuisine enjoy bread rolls, or bread stuffed with potato and fried. Saran calls them “Mom’s bread-roll fritters” at Dévi, but at Sodexo, he labels them potato fritters. Similarly, at Sodexo he calls his traditional chicken korma “coco-cashew chicken” in a creamy white sauce.

Consulting chef Steve Petusevsky of Coral Springs, Fla., says there’s a slippery boundary between too much information and not enough. When he worked as an R&D director for Whole Foods, he labeled prepared foods with a “V” for vegetarian and with fern leaves

for vegan, because, he explains, in the retail environment, consumers look for categories to assist their buying decisions. But don’t assume diners want to be labeled.

“Naming artichoke carpaccio ‘raw artichoke’ may appeal to raw-food followers,” he notes, “but the Italian name elevates the dish to a gourmet appetizer.”

As part of chefs’ training at The Culinary Institute of America (CIA) at Greystone in St. Helena, Calif., hospitality instructor Martha Keller teaches her rule of thumb on crafting diner-friendly menus: Use only two or three foreign or exotic names per menu category.

Even with a cuisine of fairly exotic ingredients and rich cultural references, Saran strives to maintain clarity in the menu.

“You don’t need the ancient name of every dish, nor the queen who first ate it,” he notes. “Keep the menu wording uncluttered, or you’ll create enemies rather than diners.”

### THE ACCESSIBLE MENU

“Helping to make diners’ food selection easy is our job,” asserts Jeff Tenner, executive director of culinary operations at the Boston-based Legal Sea Foods. “We don’t want them to hold the menu for too long and slow down the ordering process.”

Using commonly understood words on the menu makes items accessible to diners. When Roasted Ancho Chile Chicken undersold at Legal Sea Foods, Tenner changed the name to Apricot-Glazed Chicken and watched sales dramatically increase. Diners assumed that ancho meant spicy-hot rather than smoky-mild.

Todd Downs, principal of Food Sense culinary consulting in Fort Wayne, Ind., offers this recipe for menu writing: List the ingredients, the primary cooking technique, key flavor elements and any allergens, such as seafood or nuts. Technique succinctly describes texture, says Downs, so the diner will expect a softer texture with Vermouth-braised fish than with a crispy sautéed fillet.

Every chef has his or her favorite writing rules and pet peeves. Downs dislikes the obvious, as in “meltingly tender” pot roast, which he says is redundant; braised meat should always be tender. His menu mantra is simplicity.

“Take collard greens. People love them or hate them, so I list them without descriptors,”



SUVIR SARAN/DEVI

Though he serves some exotic fare, chef Suvir Saran of Dévi in New York keeps his menu copy uncluttered with simple descriptions like Onion Kulcha with Raita.

he asserts. If a menu needs a bit more back story, Downs suggests a glossary of sorts. When he wrote the menu for his new restaurant, Bourbon Street Hideaway, he added a dictionary page to help his Midwest clientele get comfortable with New Orleans cuisine. Collard greens are defined as “long-cooked turnip and mustard greens, served with onion, bacon and ham hock tidbits.”

### GEOGRAPHIC LABELING

Downs’ glossary underscores how important regionalism has become on American menus. Wansink’s book describes four main categories of food descriptions that trigger mental expectations: nostalgic labels, such as Grandma’s zucchini cookies; sensory labels, such as velvety chocolate mousse; brand labels like Niman Ranch; and geographic labels,

which can be as broad as Tex-Mex-prepared black beans or as finite as Bangs Island mussels.

Nostalgic labels and brand labels will always be popular, because they create familiar connections, says Wansink. But the most pronounced change in descriptors he has observed is the prevalence of geographic labels over sensory labels.

In a study on desserts, Wansink labeled one with “Wisconsin apples” and the other, just “apples.” Although Wisconsin is not known for apples, sales with the geographic name jumped by 27 percent.

“My conclusion is that diners want objective data from known facts, such as place of origin, rather than subjective descriptors,” he says.

The menus at the 33 Legal Sea Foods units along the eastern seaboard are relatively

consistent, says Tenner, but there are regional differences to appeal to local diners. In the Mid-Atlantic, striped bass is called rockfish; ceviche is menued only in Florida, where diners are more familiar with it; and Montauk calamari from Long Island Sound is served in the chain's New York area restaurants.

### GARNISH CAREFULLY

Whether making rich cultural references or using regional descriptors, adding details to menu copy is like garnishing a dish. Too much garnish and the dish is overpowered; not enough and, no matter how perfectly cooked, the presentation looks dull. Tenner doesn't have a formula for embellishing the menu, but he knows the right balance when he sees it.

"There is just enough colorful terminology when diners pick up the menu and are instantly attracted to one or two items," he says.

Downs advises restraint with the "name that farm" habit, which leads to menus reading like a "Who's Who" of the Farm Bureau. He offers another pointer: After writing a description, take another look and ask yourself what you can remove and still deliver the message.

In literary arts, reading aloud is a common exercise to assess the viability of text. Richard Arakelian, national executive chef for corporate dining at Sodexo, applies this concept with his teams when designing menus.

"I found some of our descriptors too wordy and breathy. Diners should be able to describe a dish in one breath," he says. An example of a "one-breath" descriptor he uses: rosemary grilled chicken, shaved prosciutto and bruschetta tomatoes on a rosemary-Parmesan baguette.

"Our consumers don't want to read much. A quick look at the name and descriptor, a presentation plate or [point of purchase] photo, and the attraction should be made."

Sodexo menus — especially those with Indian influences developed with Saran — possess pizzazz. Consider "not-so-dull daal," Saran's special version of daal makhani, but with lighter-yellow lentils, a change that "sings and dances with flavor — and displays some humor," says Saran.

### REINFORCING THE CONCEPT

In some establishments, humor has a more central role in menu writing. Take Scott Adams,

creator of the Dilbert comic strip and owner of two northern California restaurants. At both Stacey's Café and Stacey's at Waterford, the menu is laced with laughs. This approach reinforces his concept for the restaurants — fun, casual places to enjoy good food and drink.

"I don't have much chance with Dilbert to show my corny sense of humor," he says. But when Adams' partner requests a quip for a new menu item, he passes along whatever comes to mind. "For grilled, organic salmon fillet, I wrote, 'It's the favorite dish of monks. They love their salmon-chanting evenings.'"

All corniness aside, Adams' little puns make diners stop and think about some pretentious tendencies in menu writing. Take for instance the description for Pan-Seared Ahi: "Ahi is similar to Aha, but less enlightened and more delicious."

Funny or informative, evocative or serious, menu copy benefits from a translator in the form of the waitstaff. Petusevsky believes you cannot sell even a semi-sophisticated menu without knowledgeable servers. The service staff is the diner's personal menu interpreter.

"Don't over-write the menu. Let the server fill in the blanks and create customer interaction," he advises.

In her classes at the CIA, Keller emphasizes the need to train servers on three to five talking points about each dish. If daily specials aren't thoughtfully explained, servers may not be confident enough to give the dishes' names and describe the components and technique.

At Dévi, Saran prepares "cheat sheets" for most of his India-inspired dishes.

"I want the servers to know the basic recipe, the broad history of the dish and why I put it on the menu," he says. "I trust servers to know basic concepts about Indian food."

In the end, whether the menu displays many or few words, trust is a fundamental component. Though diners may choose the "succulent Italian seafood fillet" over a seafood fillet, that fillet still needs to deliver good flavor for which customers will make a return visit. ☺

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#### ▶ TREAD LIGHTLY:

Resist the urge to overwhelm diners with sources, symbolism and foreign language in the menu copy

#### ▶ LAW OF ATTRACTION:

You've hit the right formula when diners are drawn to a couple of items as soon as they open the menu