

A cake by any other name...

Eating sensibly is hard enough without the mouth-watering descriptions of menu speak, complains comedian Dave Smith

A long time ago food was, I presume, regarded as merely functional – a means by which we could stay alive and get the energy to go out the next day and hunt for more. The word 'hunt' will give you a clue as to when food was purely seen as an energy source. Doubtless, prehistoric people had taste buds and liked eating, but I can't really imagine our hairy ancestors saying, 'Ooh, that filet de mammoth was divine, but I think a little more tarragon in the cream-of-pterodactyl sauce would have brought out the flavour of the wild mushrooms.'

Dinner time at the cave was so easy. The biggest food choice prehistoric people ever had to make was, 'Me like/me no like?' as opposed to today's minefield of, 'Mmm, I wonder if it's got anchovies in it/it's gluten-free/ I'll still have room for something from the sweet trolley?'

There must have been a time when people began to eat for pleasure rather than solely as a way of surviving, and I'd guess that this coincided with

the advent of restaurants and the extraordinary brand of language they use to describe what is, after all, just food.

For the sake of argument, let's blame the Romans. They were well known for their hedonistic approach to food (amongst other things), but I doubt if their eating orgies would have been quite so wild if the food on offer had been simply described as 'some meat on a plate'. Oh no, the thing that really got them going was the flowery description of what was on offer. Who could possibly have resisted the same dish if the menu had said:

'We implore you to try this generous medallion of tender, succulent Tuscany beef, nestling in a tiny meadow of lush salad, plucked from Mother Earth only seconds ago, accompanied by the cutest of baby vegetables and drenched in a Vesuvius lava flow of heavenly red wine sauce. All

served on a solid gold platter by the slave of your choice. Meals come with a choice of french fries OR baked potato. Please state your preference.'

Sounds tempting doesn't it? (Except perhaps to a vegetarian, but you get my point.) Now

imagine that description in Italian. Even if you weren't hungry, you'd be hard pushed to walk away from a description like that without thinking, 'Just as well I've got my loose-fitting toga on – let's eat!'

It's the same problem with French menus. Read a whole menu in those swoopy French italics and you feel as if you've been seduced, devoured, loved and heart-broken all in one go. Ordering from it leaves you feeling emotionally drained, but ravenous. Order one dish, and you feel as though you're cheating on the others. Wrong, but hugely exciting. You can't help yourself.

Even menus written in English are getting in on the act. My local 'greasy spoon' café, once the purveyor of the finest sausage sandwich that London could offer, now boasts the same simple snack as: 'a plump, engorged pork saucisse, reclining seductively on a chaise-longue of bread, clad only in gossamer-thin mustard.' My heart is pounding even as I write. I'm not hungry, but I want to go there right now and eat. Mind you, some of the romance is lost when the café owner George, bellows, 'All the teas are sugared. If you don't take sugar, don't stir it!'

Perhaps all restaurants should go back to those perspex menus with out-of-focus photographs of each dish with a number next to it, and no writing. A real passion killer I know – but otherwise, what chance has anyone ever got of eating sensibly again? ■

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