Photos by Oriana Koren

BETWEEN THE READ LINES

SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE SFA 2018 SYMPOSIUM

On menus as texts
by John Kessler

ONE HALF OF MY LIFETIME AGO, I REVIEWED A RESTAURANT for the first time. I have reviewed many hundreds since. Before everything went online, public relations firms used to send me thick envelopes with press releases to announce the opening of a new restaurant. I usually opened them over the mailroom garbage can, throwing out the glossy pictures of styled food, the chef bios, the statements from the architects, and the keepsake mouse pads. I retained only the menus, which I tucked into a folder on my desk.

I often looked through this folder of menus—augmented with others I filched from restaurants, and later, those I'd downloaded—as if I were reading a collection of short stories. In essence, that's what they were. Each menu told a brief, evocative narrative. Together, they comprised a sprawling story with a plot, conflict, and characters.

Menus begin with the expressed intentions of the people who cook and sell you food, then turn to you to fill in the meaning. They illustrate, as well as any form of literature I can think of, Roland Barthes' distinction between work and text. "While the work is held in the hand," he wrote, "the text is held in language; it exists only as discourse."

I find menus written by chefs to be the most evocative. The words chefs choose echo their professional pasts, reference their culinary heroes, and find voice in their own experiences. Menus produced by restaurant groups—often with the help of marketing professionals known as "menu engineers"—are less appealing to me as a critic and as a diner, but no less interesting as texts. They can't help but reflect contemporary attitudes toward dining and communicate the ways in which appetite and culture collide on the plate.

Some menus so thoroughly reflect current fashion they became fast clichés. When *Eater* published a parody menu in 2014 called "Every Trendy Restaurant Menu," diners throughout the country enjoyed a collective snicker. I particularly liked the "moules frites that spent a semester in Thailand."

SO HOW DO YOU READ THE LANGuage of menus? Stanford University linguist Dan Jurafsky, working with a team from Carnegie Mellon University, entered data from 650,000 menu items and found a strong correlation between language and price. Words like "exotic" and "spices" raise the price of a dish, as does any mention of an ingredient's provenance.

Jurafsky et al found that mid-priced chain restaurants are far more likely to use mushy "linguistic filler" words like savory, delightful, zesty, rich, tangy, fluffy, juicy, colorful, chunky and moist. This language attempts to conceal the fact that these cheaper dishes lack ingredients of actual value. When you move down the food chain from midrange to everyday, inexpensive restaurants, the menus begin to promise *real* bacon bits, *genuine* whipped cream, and *fresh* spinach, displaying what linguists call "status anxiety." Expensive restaurants show no such anxiety: The cream comes from a cow.

If you're a scientist, you look for statistical correlation. But if you're a restaurant critic, you look for textual clues.

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Even though I no longer live in Atlanta, I stay current on its best restaurants—old habits die hard. Specifically, if I pull recent menus from three of the city's most lauded chef-driven restaurants and give them a close read, they can, taken together, offer a small universe of insight.

I began with a late-summer menu from Restaurant Eugene, where Linton Hopkins is the chef-proprietor and Chris Edwards is the executive chef. After experimenting with various menu formats over the years—including the once-popular vegetable-fish-meat tripartite—Hopkins has settled on a terse single page of a dozen or so nightly offerings, divided between starters and entrées. Although there is a tasting menu option, it is à la carte, and like most such menus today justified left on the page. You make the choices and judge each dish on its own.

This menu insists on dialogue. What's "the best American beef we can find?" It's a tacit rejection of the U.S.D.A. grading shorthand and an invitation to learn more about the Ancient White Park cattle Restaurant Eugene sources from Virginia. Maybe this $92 steak isn't Prime, but that doesn't matter.

As you read, you wonder about the unusual, non-grammatical use of capitalization. Most proper nouns are lower case, while many seemingly random words—Crumb, Tart, and Clay—appear in upper case. I asked Hopkins. As a Southern chef, he told me, he sees himself in discourse with guests and with history. As he explained it, the weird capitalization came from Thomas Jefferson, who thought upper case letters should mark the most important "words of intent." Here, the capital letters indicate the most flavorful ingredients and transformative textures.

Finally, why is the farro "mounted with duck liver"? Even though it sounds a bit obscene in English, this term comes from the French *monter*, as in *monter au beurre*—a technique of whisking butter into a sauce to make it rich and glossy. It is a subtle reminder of the kitchen's foundation in classical French technique.

A few miles south at Staplehouse, chef Ryan Smith offers a nightly tasting menu. Like most tasting menus, it is center-justified to indicate that the courses all relate to each other. What you won't find is extraneous language. We have "eggplant, shell beans, basil." "Ribeye, cauliflower, hazelnut." Smith is telling us that he can make these flavors play nice together, but isn't tipping his hand to the complex execution or intricate plating for which he is known. That will come as a surprise when the food arrives and the server delivers a verbal script.

There are, however, two exceptions. In one, Smith humanizes this menu's exercise in high culture with a reference to his Grandma Lillian and her potato bread. In the other, the menu uses a single extraneous adjective, noting the "aged duck"—a callout to a technique that is fashionable among the nation's top chefs. Smith's food is based in the lessons of home cooking. It's also in discourse with the most innovative restaurants around the country.

Another tough Atlanta reservation is Gunshow, where Kevin Gillespie is the chef-owner and Joey Ward the executive chef. When you take your seat, the busy page of a menu serves almost as your boarding pass. This menu is neither à la carte nor tasting, but an unusual hybrid.

The chefs in Gunshow's open kitchen prepare several orders of each dish in batches and then personally hawk them table to table, like dim sum. The menu, one per table, serves as a checklist, a cheat sheet, and a conversation starter. You'll pass it back and forth with the chefs and rolling-cart barkeeps, who tick off drinks and dishes. At the end of the evening, it comes back stapled to the bill.

Yet with all the show and tell, the Gunshow menu demands a read. The so-called "sandfire" listed with the clam dish is really samphire—or sea beans, a salty succulent that grows by the ocean. The misspelling is an inside joke that arose in the kitchen; the chef shares it to bring you into the process, beyond the transparency of the open kitchen. I also note the use of quotation marks around the mint jelly served with lamb. Quotes often indicate a modernist technique thumbing its nose at an outdated but still-beloved cliché. Sure enough, this quote-unquote mint jelly is an aerated mint fluid gel.

Though the menu at Gunshow bounces from Brazil to Thailand for inspiration, it speaks the vernacular of modern, seasonal Southern cuisine with a pronounced accent. Ingredients associated with the South—buttermilk, peanuts, muscadines—give it a sense of place as much as the repeated use of the word local. The "warm old-fashioned banana pudding" is like "Grandma Lillian's potato bread" at Staplehouse. Gillespie and Ward employ nostalgic, even somewhat hackneyed language to establish country-cooking bona fides. Without this conceit, upscale Southern cooking loses its bearings and its sense of purpose, becoming a farcical facsimile of itself. ("Fancy" is often a derogatory descriptor in the region.) The use of French words like *macaire* and *jus*, on the other hand, demonstrates grounding in classic French technique, still the root syntax of nearly all ambitious restaurant cooking. Szechuan peppercorns dot the chocolate mousse dessert. More on that later.

WHILE THE STYLE OF SERVICE AND use of the menu at Gunshow may seem a paradigm shifter, it hearkens to the origin of the modern menu. We're not looking that far back: It wasn't until the mid-nineteenth century that formal meals changed from banquets, where various dishes covered tabletops and guests served themselves; to meals served in courses, with dishes plated in the kitchen or on gueridons and served in individual portions to guests.

Just like at Gunshow, guests consulted an abbreviated, printed cheat sheet to see what was coming. The word for these small lists came into English through French from the Latin *minūtus*, the same root word for minute, minute (pronounced *my-NYUT*), minutiae and the short musical composition called a minuet.

These meals, not small by any means, were often as elaborate as the most insufferably long tasting menu you've ever sat through, only with larger portions. The French, in their Cartesian way, developed names and language for the ordering of courses. I noticed an unusual vestige of this practice in a menu reprinted in the book *Menu Design in America*. It detailed a copious feast prepared for Andrew Johnson at the Louisville Hotel soon after he succeeded Lincoln as President. What, I wondered, were "hot relieves"? It was the *relevé*, or "remove," which came to the table after it had been cleared of the fish course. The *relevé* was followed by the entrance to the meal, or the *entrée*, which was then followed by the meal's centerpiece, the roast. (These coursed meals were plotted like a Henry James novel, with the climactic moment halfway through and the denouement quite lengthy.)

At some point, English speakers decided that by the time they reached the entrée it was the de facto main course, while the French kept its intended meaning as a precursor to the main event. This has created linguistic confusion ever since.

By the turn of the twentieth century, an American menu vernacular had begun to develop. While European menus of the period tended to assign proper names

Menus at even the most **FORWARD-THINKING** Southern restaurants still **USE NOSTALGIC LANGUAGE** to establish their country-cooking bona fides.

and preparations to both classic and invented dishes, American menus were plainspoken and unpoetic. I saw both in a robust menu from Portola-Louvre in San Francisco in 1913, which served minced turkey in cream with poached eggs as well as sand dabs meunière. "Fresh California Vegetables" included cauliflower, artichokes, and eggplant. Stewed tomatoes, asparagus, okra, and corn, were listed under "canned vegetables." (It makes me think that with today's obsession with conservas—the Spanish word for tinned seafood—artisanal canned veggies may stage a comeback.) Another bit of prototypical Californian menu language: potatoes got nearby place names—Salinas, Saratoga—to localize the menu.

In the 1940s and 1950s, so-called Southern restaurants enjoyed a wave of popularity across the country. Menus from the period codified many typically American dishes, such as fried chicken and barbecue pork, as Southern. They also engaged in the worst kind of racial stereotyping. Images of mammies and men who bore more than a little resemblance to Uncle Remus appeared on menus as far away as Los Angeles. White diners at these restaurants could feel superior to Southerners yet also enjoy the benefits of the unequal power structure through the nostalgia hiding just beneath the folksy surface. I can't help but wonder if it correlates to the popularity of *Gone with the Wind*, released as a blockbuster film in 1939. It seems that mere mention of the word "Southern" presents an excuse to engage in racial stereotyping. Perhaps the 1954 *Brown vs. the Board of Education* decision also gave fuel to this trend.

As some American menu writers succumed to their worst instincts, others set about elevating the vernacular. The opening of The Four Seasons in New York in 1959 was not only a triumph of urban architecture, it was a game changer for American menu design and language. The Four Seasons discovered a spare, appetizing poetry in the plain language of American restaurant menus. Like the best American menus today, it drew broadly from international influences and puts a primacy on seasonal, local ingredients. It still reads beautifully. Consider these dishes: tiny shrimps in shoyu, french fried; chicken cream soup with new oats; Amish ham steak with apricot dumpling; beefsteak tomatoes carved at table; prosciutto with ripe figs; mint-roasted epaulet of baby lamb, and something called the queen's grouse with blackberry beignets.

The postwar years saw the influx of the "le" and "la" restaurants as Americans began to appreciate how much better the French ate. Television chef and cookbook author Julia Child, and first lady

Jacqueline Kennedy did much to popularize French cuisine as culturally aspirational and a means to improve quality of life. My parents for years joked about what a little snob I had become when I asked to have my sixth birthday in 1967 at Chez Marcel, the little French restaurant in our suburb of Washington, D.C. (I loved escargot, but I think what I really loved was the fresh garlic and real butter.)

Henri Soulé opened La Côte Basque in New York in the late 1950s. Soon, many restaurants wrote their menus in French. French even began showing up on inexpensive menus as a marker of class. Phrases like *du jour* lasted long past their expiration date. French menus looked classy, and they carried all sorts of encoded information thanks to the the rigidity of French cuisine. Soulé's guests soon learned that sole Véronique came in a sauce of enriched stock and peeled white grapes, and that a blanquette was a creamed veal stew with carrots. Just a few English words appeared on the La Côte Basque menu: striped bass, a North American species; and grapefruit. Perhaps the notion of eating half a grapefruit as an appetizer was so repugnant to the chef's French sensibility that he didn't want to dignify it with a translation.

The French menu situation escalated to the point that the firebrand *New York* magazine restaurant critic Gael Greene took up arms in a 1969 review of La Caravelle. "I cannot imagine any Frenchman walking into a Paris restaurant and wrestling docilely with a menu in untranslated English," she wrote. "But for masochists...what joy! We fake it. Order "le sirloin steak" or anything we happen to recognize. Accept whatever mysterious concoction appears before us." In the 1970s, French began disappearing from menus.

In the 1970s and 1980s, American chefs became less concerned with classic culinary repertoires. They no longer interpreted canonical dishes; they created new gustatory delights. As menu writers, they gave up on the terse, plain-spoken style associated with American food and let their purple prose flags fly. Action-packed descriptions noted the preparation of dishes, bringing the diner into the sybaritic space of the kitchen.

I cooked at Cafe Giovanni in Denver from 1988 to 1990. Our menu offered such dishes as "tender veal sweetbreads simmered in a rich brown sauce with fresh mushrooms" and "an individual rack of spring lamb, marinated and oven roasted with herbs and spices." Even simple dishes got the swoony prose, such as "tender homemade egg pasta tossed in a rich sauce of cream, egg, butter, and imported cheeses, dusted with fresh ground black pepper." It was the kind of menu language that would eventually migrate to a less expensive neighborhood. But in 1980s Denver, we had to reassure guests at the most expensive restaurant in town that we were indeed using imported cheese. (We weren't.)

By the 1990s and 2000s, creative, individualistic fare in restaurants became the norm rather than the exception. Chefs signaled their command of local flavors, creative innovations and values as a cook with what they called the "plate set" and diners called the "garnishes." There might be a grilled pork chop or a pan-roasted fillet of grouper, but all the rest of the stuff on your plate—the "with"—told you where you were and who the chef was.

I kept a menu from Atlanta's South City Kitchen in 2004, when Jay Swift was chef. Today, it reads as a prime "with" text. Crispy fried Carolina trout with horseradish slaw, fries and pickled okra tartar sauce" is a pretty straightforward dish if you think about it, but the "new South" language promises a distinctive personality and an exceptional rather than typical fried fish meal.

I can't remember if I liked that dish or not as a critic. But if I didn't, you can bet I would have complained that all the fancy-sounding seasoning was lipstick on a pig. Perhaps sensing the problems with interchangeable plate sets, chefs began dropping the word "with." I pulled from my collection a 2005 menu from Aria in Atlanta, where Gerry Klaskala was and is chef. The garnishes seemed intrinsic to the primary ingredients. The Aria menu dispatched with most adjectives (other than "feathery" to describe potato cakes) and assumed the diner's familiarity with such ingredients as ponzu.

American menus still largely look like this.

In the mid-2000s, even Galatoire's in New Orleans dropped its longstanding menu format—a terse list of named dishes in the French manner—in favor of the more American descriptive format. The change was subtle but significant in the way the reader-eater entered into a dialogue with this text. Before, you could just remember that Crabmeat Yvonne was delicious; after, it was that dish with artichokes and mushrooms, which isn't a great match for wine, and excuse me, waiter, but are the artichoke hearts fresh?

In this decade, forward-thinking chefs have bucked against the syntax of menu writing in creative ways. In a 2010 menu from Alinea, where Grant Achatz is executive chef, circles of varying sizes were placed within the descriptions of each dish on that evening's tasting menu. The larger the circle, the more substantial the course; and the farther right it appeared, the sweeter the course. A year later, Daniel Humm at Eleven Madison Park in New York introduced a short-lived grid menu that listed only the primary ingredient for the four choices for each of the four courses. The idea was to encourage dialogue with the servers while telegraphing the various pathways through this menu to bliss.

In recent years, a new menu syntax has emerged—the oft-dreaded list of ingredients, many of which even smarty-pants food people like us don't know. Such a menu sounds the death knell for the plate set: The ingredients must work together as a unified whole. As a byproduct, this language creates a spiky poetry that today's chefs use to express themselves. Chef Daniela Soto-Innes of Cosme in New York writes her modern Mexican menu in this manner, combining indigenous culinary words like "ha'sikil p'ak" with such terse descriptors as "Abalone tostada, salsa macha, peanuts." She tips her hand to an obvious frustration with customers asking for guacamole. While she can't *not* offer this crowd pleaser, she places the word far away from her listing of all other dishes, past a sea of white space, in the bottom corner of the page. Not only does guac mess with the tone of the menu, it messes with the meter.

Chefs write menus, but it is up to us as readers and eaters to order off them and to explore and elucidate the layers of meaning within them. We might regard menus as literature inasmuch as they are stories told in prose. The menu at JuneBaby in Seattle, where Edouardo Jordan is executive chef, begins with a preamble, which itself begins with this powerful sentence: "Southern food's humble beginnings embarked when West Africans were taken from their home and were forced across the middle passage to North America." It defines the narrative from the perspective of the people of African descent, and then lets the dishes tell the story of America's greatest regional cuisine.

Even without such explicit explanatory text, menus do present actual drama. Think of the chef as protagonist: their ego so evident as to be a kind of hubris, their quest one for creative expression, and their journey, at its best, a voyage from the past of their ancestral people, to the present of the multivalent culture they embrace, to the future of what they will bring to the American table. That's character. As for conflict, look no further than the dishes themselves. Remember the Sichuan peppercorns on the chocolate dessert at Gunshow? That's conflict, and that tells a story.

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We Eat, Therefore We Yam

Parsing the Southern Cogito

by ZANDRIA F. ROBINSON