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Would a Restaurant Menu Item by Any Other Name Taste as Sweet?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the use of words on a restaurant menu, and to evaluate the impact that they have on the selection of menu items. The research comprised two distinct parts. First, four focus groups were held examining responses to five menus, each with the same menu items but using different wording. The results from the focus group analysis were used to develop a survey which was more widely distributed. From the focus group it was revealed that the occasion and participants in the dining experience influence the wording for menu item selection. Respondents discussed the mystique of the menu and confirmed a desire for menu items that would not normally be prepared at home. It was also of interest the "mouthwatering" effect that the words haw on potential customers and what a strong persuader these words were. The survey reinforced the focus group research in many ways, also stressing the positive effect of descriptive words such as "Tender'; "Golden" and "Natural" to the choice of menu items. The research has identified the importance of the choice and use of words in the design of a menu that operations management need to be aware of

Keywords

Tim Lockyer, Food and Beverage

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By Tim Lockyer

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The research has identified the importance of the choice and use of words in the design of a menu that operations management need to be aware of.

Introduction

Menu analysis and engineering is the accepted phrase used for the management of the items on a restaurant menu relating to which Jones and Atkinson (1994) identify two broad categories. The first relates to average spend analysis, which includes techniques suggested by Kreck (1984) to compare the menu average against the guest average spend for a particular menu, and work by Miller (1987) which is based on taking the average amount spent by a guest and creating from that a frequency distribution. The second approach is that of menu engineering as proposed by a number of authors (Miller, 1987; Kasavana and Smith, 1982; Uman, 1983; Pavesic, 1985). The analysis undertaken by Kasavana and Smith (1982) used a four quadrant matrix with the X and Y coordinates being the popularity and sales contribution margin respectively. Those items that had high popularity and high contribution margin were placed in the top right quadrant, while those with low popularity and low contribution margin were placed in the bottom left quadrant. Each item on the menu was placed in its relevant quadrant, and then analyzed to evaluate how or if the items could be moved to increase the menu's overall contribution margin. The basic premise of this work is the manipulation of menu items in order to achieve the desired overall level of profit required. One of the factors that menu engineering analysis seeks to determine is how one item on the menu sells in relation to other items on the menu (Miller, 1987). This is important because each item on a menu has a different contribution margin in relation to food cost, labor and facilities. A restaurant normally wishes to sell those items with a high contribution margin and not those with a low contribution margin (Beran, 1995; LeBruto Quain & Ashley, 1997; Hayes & Huffmann, 1985). As suggested by Jones and Mifli (2001), in comparing these two approaches there has not been a clear consensus as to the efficacy or otherwise of the alternatives. In addition other researchers have proposed a number of different modifications to these approaches (LeBruto Quain & Ashley, 1997; Beran, 1995), and a third has been proposed, which

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takes into consideration additional factors that affect the cost of the menu item such as the labor cost required to prepare the menu item (Hayes and Huffman, 1985; Bayou & Bennet, 1992).

When considering the physical design of the menu and how it is laid out, gaze-motion theory has been identified (Miller 1987; Mooney 1994; Davis Lockwood and Stone 1998). The purported theory behind this is that customers read sections of a menu card in a specific order (not from top to bottom), and because of this it is suggested that the location of items on the menu are important as they influence the level of sales of items. Bowen and Morris (1995) in an empirical study concluded that if a menu was re-designed following the suggested principles it did not result in increase sales.

When further considering the actual menu a review of the literature reveals little in relation to the use of the language used. The following extracts give a feeling of the current understanding of menu language (Dittmer Griffin, 1994, 297):

"... the language used to describe menu items may make a good impression and induce customer orders. The description of foods may make the customer hungry and may help to increase the number of sales ... A food and beverage operator can exercise great influence over the amount of the average check by using written descriptions that make menu items sound interesting. Customers tend to react positively to foods that are appealingly described and negatively to those that are not."

It is clear from other disciplines that the use of words is an important part of communication. Bearing in mind that language 'denotes, connotes and emotes' (Paulson, 2003) the effect of the use of words in this medium is especially important. The words on the menu are there to entice a dinner guest to choose or purchase and so are in fact an 'advertisement' of the food that is on offer. Karasik (2003) considers selling to be a lot like acting, where an actor's job is to convince and persuade an audience by evoking emotions. This can be likened to the words on a menu evoking mental images of the choice of food. The perception of the customer contemplating the meal which aids the purchase decision is what the menu is seeking to shape.

There has been much research into the effect that words have in the marketing and advertising environment (Westphal, 1997; Paulson, 2003; Simmons, 2003). One example is work done on language in services advertising, where Stem (1988) reports that one purpose of advertising research is to 'ascertain the meaning of messages and thus enable advertisers and marketers to communicate effectively with their targeted customers... Standard approaches to research involve examination of advertising verbals and visuals to interpret what the messages mean to the perceivers" (Stern, 1988 p 3). Applying these principles to a menu in a restaurant could provide useful information towards increasing restaurant returns. When a menu is read, the guest seeks to gain an idea or understanding of the food that will be ordered so they can make a choice. Words create moods in many ways and each word contains a powerful magic (Lesesne, 2000). The words help to blend an image of what is to come. Imagery, as a literary construct relies on words appealing to the senses, and the sensory associations can bring an imaginatively exciting dimension (Stern, 1988), in this case to the menu's message.

Methodology:

The research for this paper took place in Hamilton, New Zealand. Hamilton is the fourth largest city in New Zealand after Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. New Zealand is a culturally diverse country which includes Maori, Polynesian, European, Asian, South African, Indian and other mixes of people. This research comprised two data collection methods; the first was through the use of a focus group and the second through the use of a convenience survey conducted among a random

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selection of the population of Hamilton, which resulted in a data set of 200 usable surveys. The objective of the research was to understand the impact that words have on the selection of restaurant menu items.

Focus group:

This part of the research comprised four focus groups with a total of 48 participants. The participants were self-selecting, a letter was delivered to the mail boxes of randomly selected homes in the Hamilton area, inviting the participation. This letter included a phone number to call and information about a NZ\$30 book voucher that they would receive if they participated, plus refreshments. No attempt was made to have people with high or low restaurant usage or to specify any particular demographic characteristics. Randomness of selection was part of the recruitment process, and it was decided that diversity in the groups was appropriate (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). As there was no reason to believe that a group of randomly self selected focus group members in any particular area would have different views from others in New Zealand, the members of the focus groups were recruited solely from people resident in Hamilton. The focus group meetings followed the same procedure for each of the four meetings: a modified nominal group approach was used for the main discussion component, plus a written survey form was given to participants for the collection of demographic information. All data collected was done so anonymously using randomly assigned numbers.

Survey

The objective of the survey was to measure the validity of the findings from the focus group after the focus group meetings. To accomplish this a survey was prepared and delivered to randomly selected areas of Hamilton, this included an addressed freepost return envelope. Approximately 1,800 surveys were delivered which resulted in 200 usable responses. As indicated the survey covered the same areas identified as significant from the focus group meetings, and comprised both open and closed questions plus questions about demographics. The closed questions included ranking, seven-point Likert-style questions.

Results:

Discussion - Focus Group

At the start of the focus group meeting the participants were asked to complete some basic demographic information. Over all the focus group meetings 28 percent of participants were male and 72 percent were female. Just over 23 percent of participants were aged between 21 and 30 with the same percentage aged between 41 and 50. The smallest number of participants (12.8 percent) were aged older than 61. In relation to family income the largest number (40.4 per cent) had an annual income of between NZ\$40,001 and NZ\$60,000. The next largest group (21.4 percent) had a family income of NZ\$60,001 to NZ\$80,000. The smallest number (2.1 percent) had an income less than NZ\$20,000.

Throughout the discussion and analysis the following five menus in Table 1 were used. Each menu represents the same menu items but presented using different words. To begin with, several menus were designed, which involved visits to local restaurants to investigate the use of words in different types of establishment to determine how the words were used to denote particular characteristics. The items on draft menus were adjusted according to how successfully they leant themselves to types of descriptive wording. The objective was to obtain five clearly defined menus but with each as closely as possible repeating the first menu.

TABLE 1:

Five Menus Used in The Analysis

FRENCH STYLE MENU (1)

Consommé julienne Poulet sauté chasseur Pointes d'asperges au beurre Pommes au lard Charlotte aux pomes

ENGLISH WITH FRENCH MENU (2)

Clear soup gamished with a julienne of vegetables
Chicken sautéed in butter and served with sauce Chasseur
Asparagus points au beurre
Potatoes au lard
Apple Charlotte

SEASONAL MENU (3)

Spring vegetables garnished in a fresh clear soup

Spring chicken cooked and served in a sauce flavoured with new season mushrooms, shallots and tomatoes

New season asparagus points with dairy fresh butter

New season potatoes cooked with fresh onions and bacon

New season apples in a mould of fresh buttered bread

ELABORATE STYLE MENU (4)

A delicious flavorful clear soup garnished with the freshest, most tasty vegetables
The most tender chicken cooked till golden and served with a delicious sauce finished with tomatoes, shallots and mushrooms
Asparagus points quickly cooked to perfection and served with rich creamery butter
Potatoes cooked to perfection with the addition of the flavors and aroma of bacon and onions
The finest apples gently cooked and finished in a mound of delicious buttered bread

ORGANIC STYLE MENU (5)

Naturally grown ingredients made into a crystal clear soup served with organic slivers of vegetables

Free range organic chicken cooked and served with mushrooms, shallots and tomatoes in a naturally produced sauce

Organically grown asparagus points served with natural butter Naturally grown farm potatoes, cooked and served with onions and bacon Orchard fresh apples cooked and served with natural grain, buttered bread

Using the menus in Table 1 the respondents were asked: "Please indicate using the following scale how appealing each menu is to you". The participants were given a five point scale from 1 = most appealing, to 5 = very unappealing. The results are presented in Table 2 and the rating with the highest mean is highlighted. As can be seen the results were mixed for some menus. For menu number one 19 persons (42 percent) rated it as "Very Unappealing". For menu number three 19 persons (42 percent) rated it as the one with the highest appeal, while menu five had 12 persons (27 percent) indicating very appealing and 10 persons (22 percent) very unappealing. Although the sample set is small, there is no statistical difference between gender, age, income or night attending the focus group and the rating of the menus by participants.

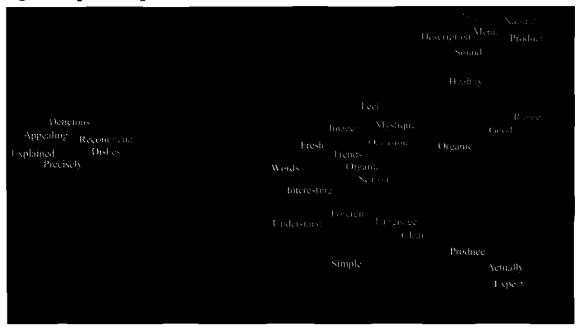
The participants were then asked to write down on large sheets of paper why they had indicated their very appealing menu and their very unappealing menu. These sheets plus that rating of the menus were used for the focus group discussion.

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Table 2:										
Menu Appeal										
	Menu 1		Me	enu2	Ме	nu 3	Menu 4		Me	nu 5
	Participants' selection	Mean Percentage								
Very appealing	1	2	9	20	19	42	4	9	12	27
Appealing	6	13	6	13	14	31	12	27	7	16
Neither Appealing or Unappealing	10	22	13	29	10	22	5	11_	7	16
Unappealing	9	20	15	33	1	2	11	24	9	20
Very Unappealing	19	42	2	4	1	2	13	29	10	22

Figure 1: Spatial Map of Menu Discussion



Because of the nature of focus group discussion this process generated a lot of transcribed text to be analyzed, for which content analysis was used. In using content analysis there is always some concern about the reliability of the findings; this has been defined as the extent to which a measuring procedure yields the same result (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). To assist with this a computer content analysis program, TextSmarttm was employed, which is primarily for the analysis of open-ended survey response. The program uses cluster analysis and multi-dimensional scaling techniques to automatically analyze key words and groups text into categories. Thus it can code without the requirement of a user-created dictionary, which has the effect of reducing coding biases.

The spatial map in Figure 1 was developed using TextSmart^{sh} by loading all the menu related responses from the focus group discussions. The first task undertaken is to 'cleanse' the data. The purpose of this is to minimize irregularities by using a number of tools including spelling correction and the development of alias and exclusion lists. The object of this is to get some common meaning in words. Care must be taken during this process to ensure that the underlying meaning is not changed. These adjustments are done in a live interactive environment where the results of any change can be immediately seen, and inappropriate changes can be undone. During this process the categories as illustrated in the various colors are created. The visualization features of the software are used where the colors illustrate category plots of word associations. Also a process of "brushing" allows for the verification and integration of the data using on-screen functions to highlight specific words, responses and categories.

Looking at Figure 1 an interesting category is that slightly to the right of centre. The first part of that grouping included the words "Words, Fresh, Interesting". It was clear from the focus group discussion that the words used on the menu can give the guest a definite feeling for the menu, in this case that the items on the menu are both "Fresh" and "Interesting". The second identified grouping, "Feel, Image, Mystique", emphasizes an important part of the group discussion in that the menu is more than a list of items but it also is used to entice and is in fact the beginning of the dining experience. The focus group particularly discussed how important "Mystique" is but that was also closely related to "Occasion". There was in the focus group a clear relationship between the "Occasion" of the meal and "Mystique". The last group, "Trends, Organic, Season" indicates the changes in current trend towards menu items that reflect that the produce is both "Organic" and "Fresh".

The next grouping to be discussed is that of, "Menu, Pure, Natural, Products", "Description, Sounds, Healthy". From the focus group discussion these terms were emphasized in relation to the feelings that the words on the menus give. The subsequent grouping comprised "Good, Range, Organic"; it was stated in the discussion that the "use of these words give a good feeling when reading the menu". They also reflect this modern trend or fashion which leans towards a specific appeal for organic produce.

To discuss the grouping on the bottom right, "Produce, Actually, Expect", it was stated that there is a need to have an explanation of how the product was produced, and this description needs to relate directly to what is "Actually" served and be in line with what the guest "Expects".

The category next to that contains the single word, "Simple" but with the words "Understand, Foreign, Language, Clear" surrounding it though not in the category. The importance of ensuring that the language and other aspects of the words used is "Simple" indicates that guests require the menu to be understandable and that the terms used are those "acceptable in the right circumstances".

The final category on the far left of Figure 1 has three parts to it: 1). "Appealing, Delicious", "Recommend, Dishes", "Explained, Precisely" This referred to the need expressed by the focus group of two areas: that of the "importance of an explanation" of the menu and the second is that this is done in an appealing way.

This next section of the research discusses the comments made by the focus group participants in relation to each of the five menus.

Discussion – Survey

As previously indicated there were 200 usable survey responses, of which 28.7 percent were male and 71.3 percent were female. In relation to ethnic mix, 63.9 percent were European/Pakeha, 9.0 percent were Maori (approximately 16 percent of the New

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Zealand Population is Maori), 22.2 percent Asian and 5.3 percent other. Table 3 gives information on the age and family income of the survey participants. As is evident from Table 3 the largest age group of participants was between 31 and 40 years with the smallest group being those over 61 years. Also from Table 3 it is evident that the largest family income group was those \$20,001 to \$40,000 followed by those earning \$40,001 to \$60,000 (New Zealand dollars). The current average salary in New Zealand is NZ\$28,808 (Pink 2004).

Table 3:		
Age and Family	Income of Survey	Participants.

	Frequency	Percent
20 years or less	16	8.2
Between 21 and 30	75	38.7
Between 31 and 40	33	17.0
Between 41 and 50	26	13.4
Between 51 and 60	29	14.9
Older than 61 years	15	7.7
Total	194	100.0
	Frequency	Percent
Less than \$20,000	45	24.1
\$20,001 to \$40,000	58	31.0
\$40,001 to \$60,000	26	10.2

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Less than \$20,000	45	24.1
\$20,001 to \$40,000	58	31.0
\$40,001 to \$60,000	36	19.3
\$60,001 to \$80,000	23	12.3
\$80,001 to \$100,000	20	10.7
More than \$100,000	5	2.7
Total	187	100.0

It was evident from the focus group discussion that there were clear differences in what menu items would be selected based on the occasion of the dining experience. For example: romantic dinner, family reunion, meal with the mother-in-law or a business meeting. Therefore, the first four questions in the survey asked about the menu selection for each of these different dining experiences to determine if there was any measurable difference. Appendix A (see last page of this paper) illustrates how each of the different four parts of the question was asked. The example in Appendix A is for romantic dinner; the same style of question was used for family reunion, etc.

As part of each set of questions as illustrated in Appendix A, the survey participants were also asked to comment why they picked their top rated item. A simple form of content analysis was used to evaluate these comments. This involved careful examination of the transcripts with the organization of similar comments into groups. These were then ranked according to frequency of comment. To keep the analysis focused on the main points from the lists of comments, the top eight comments were selected as follows:

Menu item #1 - Poulet sauté chasseur:

Feel romantic
It looks like very romantic
The dish name sounds romantic
Could not understand the meaning of "Poulet Saute Chasseur"
French language is romantic
It is exciting to try something that sounds fancy
Sounds sophisticated
Very expensive

Menu Item #2 - Chicken sautéed in butter and served with sauce chasseur:

It appears to have the nicest flavor

Sounds exotic different, but I can guess what it is

Good for old people

Nice and Rich - "better her up:

Not too heavy a meal

Seems delicious

Sounds cheap

Sensible, not to over the top

Menu Item #3 - Spring chicken cooked and served in a new season mushrooms, shallot and tomato flavoured sauce:

Easy to understand what it is

It tastes good and looks nice

Wording not too fancy, not to simple

Sounds new, nice and healthy

The description showed the most delicious

Description more romantic than other

Easy to read, tells a bit more, not too fussy

Because it tells me basically what I get

Menu Item #4 - The most tender chicken cooked till golden and served with a delicious sauce finished with tomatoes, shallots and mushrooms:

Like chicken tender

It sounded more 'lovingly' prepared and special

Only the best sounding things

Because the chicken is the most tender and the color golden sounds very good

Only menu description I felt confident I know what I was getting

Mouth watering description, very suitable

Because when the chicken cooked till golden it will be so nice

Because it explained what was in the dish clearly and used words 'tender' and 'delicious'

Menu Item #5 - Free range organic chicken cooked and served with mushrooms, shallots and tomatoes in a naturally produced sauce:

Sounds the fresh less likely to contain chemicals

I like to know what I am eating

It sounds healthier and more naturally flavorsome and a romantic???

Organic chicken

I like the sound of the food being organic-makes you think it is fresh and???

Whole family members are organic lovers

Please everyone and take care of the possibility of any food ???

Sounds healthy

It is evident from the above that the different ways of writing the same item on a menu has various the impact on the potential purchaser. For example "Poulet sauté chasseur" is romantic, harder to understand and sounds sophisticated and expensive, while for the most popular item, "The most tender chicken cooked till golden and served with a delicious sauce finished with tomatoes, shallots and mushrooms", comments of 'lovingly prepared', 'only the best', 'tender' and 'delicious', 'confident that the guest knows what they are getting' and 'mouth-watering description' were reported.

As illustrated in Table 4 (next page), for all the different dining experiences menu item number four was rated as "Most likely to select"; this was different than for the focus group. Although for a meal with the Mother-in-law menu item number five was co-top rated and for a Business meeting item number three was co-top.

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Table 4: **Rating of Menu Item for Survey Participants**

Item 1 Poulet sauté chasseur

Item 2 Chicken sautéed in butter and served with sauce chasseur

Item 3 Spring chicken cooked and served in a new season mushrooms, shallot and tomato flavoured sauce

Item 4 The most tender chicken cooked till golden and served with a delicious sauce finished with tomatoes, shallots and mushrooms

Item 5 Free range organic chicken cooked and served with mushrooms, shallots and tomatoes in a naturally produced sauce

	Item 1		Item 2		Item 3		Item 4		Item 5	
	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent
Romantic Dinner										
Most likely to select	2.00	18.03	5.00	10.17	2.00	25.56	1.00	95.75	3.00	17.58
Likely to select	5.00	10.93	2.00	19.77	3.00	23.33	2.00	26.82	3.00	17.58
Neither Likely or Unlikely to select	4.00	12.57	3.00	18.08	1.00	26.11	3.00	15.64	2.00	25.82
Unlikely to select	3.00	15.85	1.00	41.24	4.00	16.11	4.00	15.08	5.00	10.44
Most Unlikely to select	1.00	42.62	4.00	10.73	5.00	8.89	5.00	6.70	1.00	28.57
Family Reunion										Control of the Contro
Most likely to select	3.00	9.78	4.00	9.94	2.00	28.02	1.00	37.70	3.00	20.44
Likely to select	5.00	7.07	3.00	13.26	3.00	27.47	2.00	28.96	2.00	22.65
Neither Likely or Unlikely to select	3.00	9.78	2.00	19.89	1.0	342	3.00	14.75	1.00	24.00
Unlikely to select	2.00	19.57	1.00	44.01	4.00	8.24	4.00	10.93	4.00	11.60
Most Unlikely to select	1.00	53.80	5.00	8.84	5.00	7.14	5.00	7.65	3.00	20.44
Mother-in-law										
Most likely to select	4.00	10.50	4.00	12.29	2.00	26.23	231.00	34.97	1.00	24.73
Likely to select	3.00	13.81	3.00	17.32	3.00	25.68	2.00	23.50	3.00	17.58
Neither Likely or Unlikely to select	4.00	10.50	2.00		10	10	3.00	18.03	2.00	23.08
Unlikely to select	2.00	16.57	1.00	83	4.00	11.48	4.00	16.39	5.00	12.64
Most Unlikely to select	1.00	488	5.00	11.17	5.00	9.29	5.00	7.10	4.00	21.98
Business Meeting										
Most likely to select	2.00	20.65	3.00	18.89	1.00	20.0	1.00		4.00	16.94
Likely to select	3.00	15.22	2.00	21.67	3.00	19.34	1.00		3.00	17.49
Neither Likely or Unlikely to select	5.00	12.50	4.00	15.56	130	20.00	3.00	19.55	100	**************************************
Unlikely to select	4.00	14.67		7,30,00	4.00	13.81	3.00	19.55	5.00	15.85
Most Unlikely to select	7.00		5.00	1006 by FIU	5.00	10,50	5.00	11.73	2.00	27.87
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Discussion and Conclusion

Understanding the words used on a menu and the impact that the words have on a potential purchaser is a very complex question. Previous research into menu engineering and related areas has helped practitioners to understand some of these complexities and has in many respects looked at mechanical approaches to the management of menu items sold to guests. This research was based solely on the words used on a menu, to gain an understanding what impact those words may have and under what circumstances they impact the purchase of menu items.

It was evident from the focus group discussion that there were broadly diverse views, but it was also clear that menu number four was the most popular. For this menu words such as "Fresh", "Tasty", "Clear explanation" were attached. Another area that was very strongly emphasized was that of "Mystique"; it was clear that many people going to a restaurant for a meal are looking for something that they would most probably not cook at home, and something that adds a small though appealing amount of mystery to the dining experience. This was also evident in the discussion when the participants were asked if they would try a dish on a menu if they did not know what it was, but just to experiment. Many of the focus group participants indicated that they would, but that cost was important, that they would try different things if the portion size was small and also the cost was low. This principle could be applied by regularly adding one or two new items as 'tasters' especially in small portion size items.

Although each of these points are important, overall there was a clear preference from the focus group for items on the menu that were clear, tasty, mouthwateringly described, fresh and natural.

The survey was conducted to measure if similar results would be produced away from the focus group. However, similar characteristics were identified as important in the selection of menu items.

It was identified from this research that the wording of items on a menu does have an impact of the selection of items. But it is also evident that additional research is required. The next step would be to find a few restaurants that would allow the wording of one item on a menu to be changed, possibly every week, and then to measure the level of sales for that item. As yet the writer has not been able to persuade a restaurant to undertake such an approach as it could impact on revenue. Perhaps a training institution with a restaurant which students operate for the public may be interested – if so, I would be keen to hear of it, and perhaps pursue joint further research in this area.

One last comment which was not mentioned in the research analysis, it was surprising the number of people in the written survey who took the trouble to write that they did not like mushrooms!

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Appendix A

Example of how each of the four questions were asked	
Listed below are five items that may appear on a restaurant menu. Imagine that you are goin	ıσ
out for a romantic dinner , Please rate each of them from 1 to 5 with 1 = most likely to sele	ect
to 5 = least likely to select and put the number in the box. Please use each number only one	
Poulet sauté chasseur	
Chicken sautéed in butter and served with sauce chasseur	
Spring chicken cooked and served in a new season mushrooms, shallot and tomato	
flavoured sauce	
The most tender chicken cooked till golden and served with a delicious sauce finished with tomatoes, shallots and mushrooms	_
Free range organic chicken cooked and served with mushrooms, shallots and tomatoes in a naturally produced sauce	
Why did you pick your number 1 = "most likely to select"?	
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