



# EAT

The language used on a menu and its design influences what people eat.

# YOUR

Celia Woolfrey finds out how this can steer diners towards more sustainable choices

# WORDS





## flavor trends

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Guests don't read menus," says consultant Bill Main FCSI. "The average guest spends less than two minutes scanning," he adds, as he gives insights into the skill of menu optimization. This dark art can, among other things, nudge guests into choosing the dishes that deliver the highest margins, and maximize profits without the need to raise the price of a single dish. Although diners pay the briefest of attention to it, the look and layout of the menu, how it feels in your hands, the logos and symbols it shows all reinforce a restaurant's brand values.

All a far cry from the days when diners simply ate whatever chef was cooking. Menus first emerged in Paris in the mid-to-late 19th century and the convention quickly spread. Fast forward 100 years, and the desktop publishing revolution in the 1990s slashed costs of having a professionally printed document. No longer something you had to send off to the typesetter, anyone with an inkjet printer could produce a menu – change the dishes, remove poor sellers and tweak descriptions whenever needed.

The tweaking includes using language to big up the taste experience and a desire for indulgence; positioning key dishes in the first and last slots in their section and other hot spots on the page to catch a guest's eye. And, with increasing awareness of the impact of foodservice on climate change, reassuring customers on a restaurant's sustainable credentials.

### Environmental impact

Recent research by the World Resources Institute's Better Buying Lab (BBL) has shown menus can also steer diners towards making more planet-friendly dining choices – crucial given that approximately 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions are a result of growing, shipping cooking and disposing of food.

"People are much more aware now of the environmental impact of raising animals for meat," says Daniel Vennard, director of BBL. "Beef, lamb and goat, the ruminant meats, have particularly high greenhouse gas impacts per gram of protein.

**"Restaurant guests don't want things rammed down their throat, so information [about sustainability] needs to be there if people want to seek it out, without being dictatorial"**

Whereas plant-based foods are predominantly low-impact. We're not saying everyone needs to become vegan or vegetarian, we just need to shift the proportions of people's diets to more plant-based food."

In 2018, the BBL team and its commercial partners including the UK's second largest supermarket chain Sainsbury's, Hilton Hotels & Resorts and Unilever carried out a two-phase study to test whether changing the language around the way plant-based foods are described could be a relatively low-cost, effective way of persuading people to consume more of them.

### Ordering behavior

BBL and the London School of Economics had already tested ordering behavior in an online scenario. When vegetarian dishes were separated off in a box at the end of the menu, ordering behavior fell by 56% compared with when they were incorporated with all the other dishes on the menu.

Other research showed a clear correlation between describing something as healthy and consumers finding it less satisfying, to the extent that the "hunger hormone" ghrelin was higher in consumers after drinking a milkshake they thought contained 104 calories compared with the same drink when told it had 600 calories, a Stamford University study found.

To test its theory that changing the name of a dish could change perception of it, and therefore ordering behavior, BBL and its business partners generated new, alternative names for eight dishes they were serving to guests and asked respondents in an online survey what they were likely to order. The ingredients stayed the same – it was just the name that changed. The results were encouraging, so BBL constructed a "real world" study involving 10 randomly assigned cafés within Sainsbury's stores over an eight-week period, testing eight names across three different dishes.

"We put a sticker saying field-grown or Cumberland spice over the original name 'meat-free' >

warming

crunchy



sausage and mash on the menu board. Would that simple change make a difference?” recalls Jonathan Wise, who leads BBL’s work on language research, when he spoke at a webinar to share insights. “It was fantastic to see that indeed it did – we saw uplifts of more than 50% and 76%.” Renaming the meat-free breakfast a “feel-good fry-up” or “garden” or “field-grown breakfast” saw a similar uplift.

### Divisive wording

A separate experiment at BBL Stamford in the US found that healthy descriptions of zucchini side dishes, whether they were “healthy positive” (nutritious green zucchini) or “healthy restrictive” (lighter choice zucchini) were a turn-off for diners, and 41% more diners took the vegetable side when it was given an indulgent name such as “slow-roasted caramelized zucchini bites”.

BBL did a study with Brandwatch, a social listening experiment, which scanned more than 15 million posts across Twitter and Instagram looking for references to plant-based, vegan and vegetarian food. It concluded the term vegan is divisive, holding some positive but also some stronger negative connotations. The message was clear: if you want people to order don’t use terms such as meat-free, vegetarian, vegan or healthy. Use language that highlights provenance, flavor and look and feel of the dish.

It’s something that many foodservice professionals know instinctively, but now there’s hard evidence to back that up. “Name protocols are extremely powerful and important for messaging,” says FCSI Associate Costel Coca of Webb Foodservice Design. His colleague Marion Edwards, who has worked with major corporate clients, startups and nationally distributed wellness food brands says she found the BBL study validating – the key is to position that menu item as a taste experience and not call it out separately as ‘the healthy item’.

“BBL’s work is very interesting as it’s based on actual findings, not just opinion,” says Chantelle Nicholson, group operations director, Marcus

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Wareing Restaurants, who’s created exciting plant-based dishes for her restaurant Tredwells in London, and has got behind Chefs’ Manifesto, which aims to deliver a better food system for all. Tone of voice is crucial, she says. “Restaurant guests don’t want things rammed down their throat, so information [about sustainability] needs to be there if people want to seek it out, without being dictatorial.”

### Creative naming

One company that put BBL’s findings into practice is Google, which tried out the ideas at their campuses globally in a drive to promote plant-forward eating. “If you want diners to choose plant-forward, you have to lead with flavor and talk about what it delivers rather than what it doesn’t have,” says Scott Giambastiani, foodservice manager at Google Inc. “We started to see that the impact of descriptive titles and creative naming had a minimum increase of 30%, which is a huge uptick, and on many occasions we saw 100% or 200% increase.”

For menu language to have the biggest impact, it was essential to think of it as a collaborative exercise, Giambastiani says, not just between chefs and sous chefs but also engaging front-of-house staff who engage with guests. Nicholson agrees: “If the buy-in is not there from the team on the ground, it becomes a redundant and expensive exercise,” she says.

“Just the exercise of getting employees to express opinions is meaningful in and of itself. Make time to keep changing,” says Main. In his experience, for a major chain with multiple outlets, an investment of US\$25,000 in menu optimization generally will yield 10 to twenty times that in increased profitability. He qualifies this by saying there are many variables to consider, including supply chain and labor factors.

The bottom line with a menu is that, whatever you do with language and layout, remember to keep it simple. “The more easy-on-the-eye and user-friendly it is, the better,” says Main. “Bigger is never better. I never came across a menu that I couldn’t make smaller.” ■



# crunchy

Experts recommend using menu language that highlights provenance, flavor and look and feel of a dish



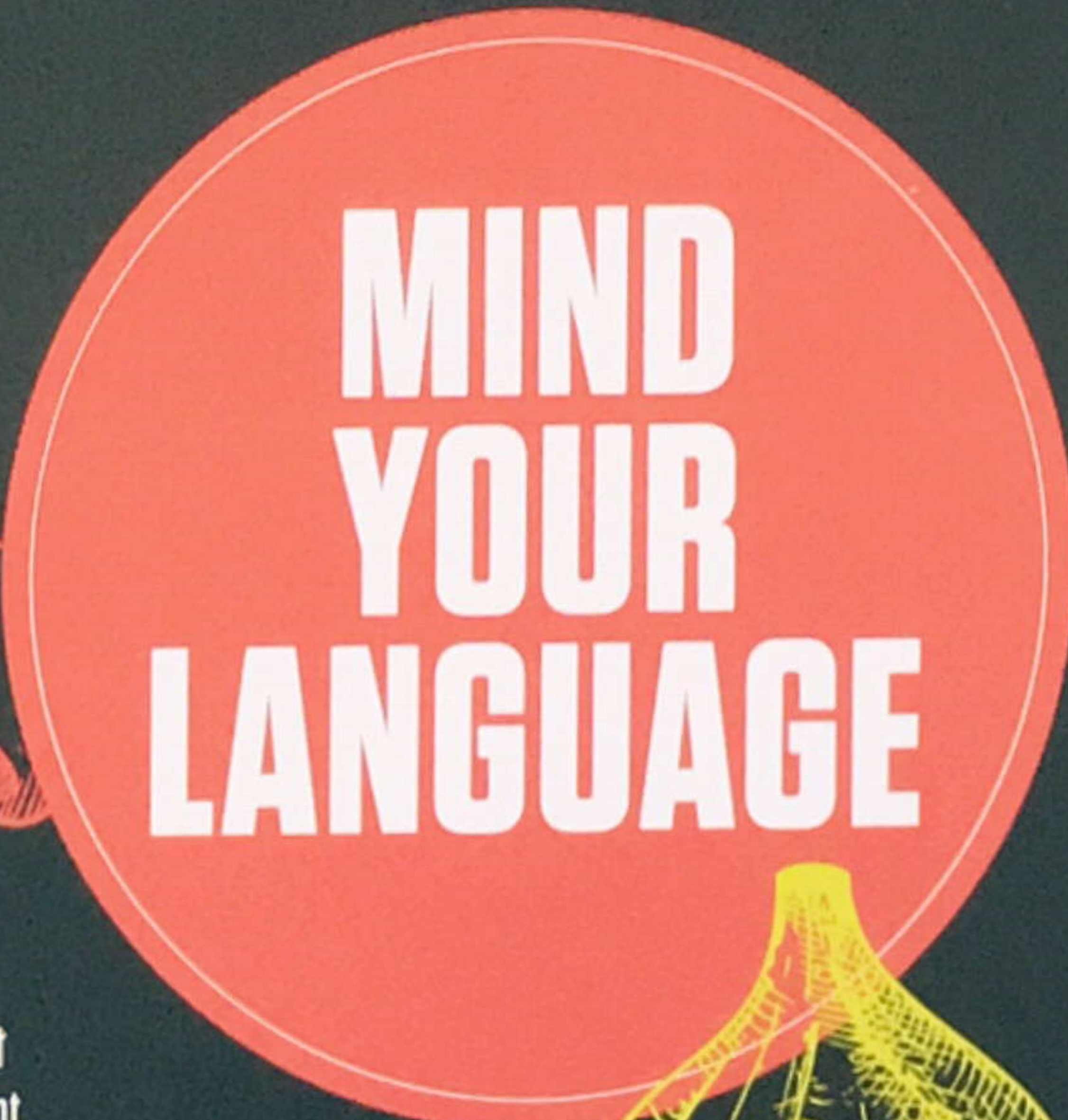
roasted

**1 Flag up provenance**

Say if it's locally grown or from a specific farm, but also evoke a place where the dish may have come from according to the ingredients – even if it's not specifically from that food culture. Renaming a low-fat vegetarian bean soup "Cuban black-bean soup" saw double-digit growth in sales for Panera, a bakery café with around 2,000 outlets in the US.

**2 Focus on flavor**

Say what the food has, rather than what it doesn't. Avoid "meat-free", "vegan" or "vegetarian". Meat-free means less of what meat eaters like, and to many, vegan means different from me. Describe look and feel, and use words that appeal to the senses such as rich and buttery, zesty, warming and crunchy.



# MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

**3****Know your audience**

What works on the US West Coast won't necessarily translate to a Paris restaurant. The language used to sell a dish to diners in a hipster neighborhood will be framed differently for an in-house supermarket café. Daniel Vennard of BBL has just started working in China, researching the food culture and linguistic norms there. "We've identified six dishes and we're in the process of testing six alternative names and different kinds of language, thinking about prestige for example," he says.

**4****Hit on the trends**

"Where I am in the Bay Area, Latin is huge, everybody loves a good Taco. So is Moroccan," says Giambastiani. "When you're naming a dish, see what people are searching for online. Go to the trend reports and find out what cuisines people want to learn about. Many of the trendy cuisines are plant-forward."



*field-grown*