

Dodging verbal volleys a dining pitfall

You may not be able to tell a book by its cover, but you can usually judge a restaurant by the greeter's opening gambit.

If you are ushered to your table with, "Hello, my name is Hermione and I'll be your waitperson/server/lackey for tonight," you might want to reconsider your dining choice. Such pre-programmed spiels are favoured by eateries whose emphasis on themes and cute menu listings tends to presage a less than gourmet culinary experience.

Gimmicks and obvious visual jokes are often the bedfellows of faux seafood, processed cheese and fruit flans filled with plastic custard, topped with a glutinous cornstarch glaze. When my son turned 18, we took him, along with a close family friend, to a restaurant offering a mind-boggling buffet selection.

Diners were encouraged to gorge themselves, at no extra charge, on everything in sight, until they could barely roll out the door. On arrival, we were shown to our table by a terminally perky young person.

Before he could draw breath to recite his lines, our friend gave him a warm smile and announced, "Hello, my name is Margaret and I'll be your customer for tonight." Recognizing that he had been upstaged, Larry — we knew his name was Larry because he wore a large button with a smile on it proclaiming the fact — was rendered momentarily speechless.

After looking wildly around for inspiration, like an actor awaiting a prompt from the wings, he burst out laughing. Freed from the straitjacket of the requisite greeting, Larry showed a refreshing aptitude for improvisation and seemed to relish the opportunity to indulge in real conversation.

The tendency to abandon spontaneity for sanitized, pre-



Kate Gilderdale

approved verbiage is an unfortunate side effect of today's corporate culture. Telemarketers who can't even pronounce your name are required to find out how you are today before trying to flog you magazine subscriptions, banking services, new windows or aluminum siding.

My desire to tell them about my state of health in excruciating detail is tempered by a niggling sympathy for their plight. Surely no one who had a choice would be trying to sell me RRSPs, a timeshare in Sarnia or a unique vacuum system for my almost carpet-free chateau.

Still, it's hard not to be brusque, particularly since these people call when you are preparing dinner or painting the ceiling.

Meanwhile, back at the restaurant, your server has returned for the fourteenth time with a breezy, "How's everything going here?" Still on your appetizer, your mouth crammed with lettuce and fake bacon bits, you offer her a strained smile and pray for deliverance from her ersatz concern.

At the end of the evening, the final verbal volley from your server is as predictable as Michèle Landsberg's musings on male ineptitude: "Have a nice night."

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