

Vintage Whine



Today's Special

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

If you are ushered to your table with a grovelling speech along the lines of, "Hello, my name is Godzilla and I will 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.

Faux murals and pillars are often harbingers of fake seafood, processed cheese and fruit flans filled with plastic custard, topped off with a glutinous cornstarch glaze in a post-nuclear hue. Back at the dawn of time when my son was a permanent resident of Chateau Gilderdale, we celebrated his birthday by taking him, along with a close family friend, to an Italian-themed restaurant. We arrived at our alleged trattoria to find a mind-boggling buffet selection, most of which was about as Italian as Justin Bieber.

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 well-rehearsed 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, blindingly yellow button with a smiley face 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-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 duct cleaning services, 'free' vacations in the Caribbean, 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 a new water heater, a timeshare in Sarnia or a unique vacuum system for my carpet-free chateau.

Still, it's hard not to be brusque, particularly since these calls inevitably occur when you are preparing dinner or painting the ceiling. Some callers accept your dismissal with good grace; others are more tenacious than Rob Ford outlining his position on transit.

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

I will leave you one of Miss Piggy's delectable bonbons: "Restaurants with peppermills the size of fire extinguishers and big red menus with the entrees spelled with f's instead of s's are always expensive. Italian restaurants with more than 120 entrees are always disappointing."

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