Menu grammar

I’ve decided to briefly look at menu grammar because I know it’s something I’ve brought up hundreds of times in my life. Going out to eat is never the same experience twice, but the variance is compounded when considering the process of looking over menus and deciding what to order.

Menu language must communicate several things to a reader—item, description, ordering options, and price. When ordering food, we must consider what we like to eat, what sounds appetizing to us at that moment, what choices we must make and how to make them, and what we’re willing to spend for the food. (Moreover, we must consider any personal obligations like religious restrictions, allergies, and what our digestive constitutions can handle without causing discomfort or pain.) Crucial to a restaurant’s success is the menu language—miscommunication leads to unhappy customers when they don’t get what they expected to get and less business, or, in worst-case scenario, no more business.

I find it puzzling that something that appears so simple can be so complicated. Listing items on a menu becomes difficult when it is necessary to describe the food that will be served. Some menus, mostly from more expensive restaurants, go so far as to list complementary salad dressings, beverages, or soups. Listing menu items grows more difficult when attempting to vary words and phrases and still make the food sound appetizing and unique. Menus are a very concise, directed marketing material, and often the use of grammar rises above that which we see in everyday life.
Some menu descriptions use full sentences, some use fragments, and some use both. The effectiveness of these types of phrases varies with their use. Sometimes fragments are more effective at offering a succinct image of the food being described. For example, from The Coventry Inn (2008) in Indiana, Pennsylvania, fragments are used effectively:

Battered Fish and/or Shrimp – Choice of either or both, served with homemade French fries; stewed tomatoes are optional at no extra charge 13.95 (Menu, Pub Dinners, October 30-November 1, 2008)

Because the items listed are simple, the description doesn’t need to add much for the customer to know what to expect. An alternative to the standard French fries is attached to the initial fragment using a semi-colon, but is a full sentence with the typical subject-verb construction.

Full sentences on menus frequently include lists of foods the customer can expect to find in the dish. Marchitelli’s Kiski Valley Inn (2008) in Saltsburg, Pennsylvania lists several items on the menu using full sentences. The following is an example of a list within the full sentence:

Crispy Popcorn Chicken Salad – Popcorn-style chicken served on a large bed of lettuce, then topped with mozzarella & cheddar cheese, baby grape tomatoes, red onions, and black olives. We suggest our House dressing. $7.95 (Feature Salads and Soups 2008)

Full sentences can sometimes be problematic if restaurateurs try to cram too much information into a simple description. Serial commas become important as lists grow. More important in the example below from The Coventry Inn is the missing conjunction.

Tasting Dinner—Five-course dinner chosen and prepared by the chef; includes tasting portions of soup, salad, fresh seafood, saddle of venison, prickly pear dessert—With Four Wine Selections matched to food served in each course... 39.95 (Menu, Fine Dining, October 30-November 1, 2008)
While it may be evident that the list is complete, the atypical use of punctuation after the dessert makes it seem like the menu writer wasn’t sure how to list the things included in the meal and, instead of making the description longer by using full sentences to clarify, decided to punctuate creatively.

Problems and errors are simple to focus on when we examine any sample of language. As a very public language, menus are especially subject to scrutiny at times… Before writing this paper, I had considered writing about comma usage, adjective placement, unclear modification, capitalization, and the use of & vs. “and” because those are common problematic areas. Instead, though, I thought it would be worthwhile to look at an under-appreciated element of menus—use of fragments and full sentences to accomplish the restaurateur’s goal.

References


Feature Salads and Soups, Marchitelli’s Kiski Valley Inn. (2008).

http://www.marchitellis.net/salads.htm *PDF