

CONSUMER ACTION

10 Things Your Restaurant Won't Tell You

By Michael Kaplan

1. “You want romance? Then don't eat here.”

It's coming. The day when you make up for past foul-ups and show that special someone how much you care. Yes, Valentine's Day. Well, do yourself a favor. Give candy, roses, jewelry. Just don't take your one-and-only out to dinner.

First off, some restaurants mark up prices as much as a third that night. At Erawan, the highly touted Chicago Thai restaurant, the nine-course tasting menu normally runs \$65 per person; on Valentine's night a similar menu in 2002 started at \$85. Plus, you'll face crowds. The National Restaurant Association says one out of every three adults eats out that night — so you'd better book an early-bird reservation.

2. “Our markups will gag you...”

Dine at a high-end steak house and you expect to pay a lot for your sirloin. But it's the extras that will carve you up. Just ask Steven Weil. He shells out \$31.95 for a steak at Gallagher's in Saddle Brook, N.J. “What gets me,” he says, “is the baked potato. They charge \$4.95 for a \$1 potato.”

Gallagher's is hardly alone in getting a lot extra for its extras. French fries at Ruth's Chris go for up to \$5.95; a romaine and iceberg lettuce salad at Morton's is \$6.95. Jim DeJoy, purchasing manager for the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone, in St. Helena, Calif., contends that some restaurants turn their offerings into cash cows. For instance, he says 4 pounds of lettuce that should produce 20 portions will cost a restaurant \$8 — or 40 cents a serving. However, he has seen some dining spots charge \$6.50 per salad — or, roughly, a 1,500% markup.

3. “...plus we'll charge you when you least expect it.”

Want to bring a birthday cake to a restaurant as a surprise dessert for a friend? Go ahead, but be prepared to pay a cutting charge. Or how about trying that exquisite bottle of merlot you've been stashing in the cellar for your next visit to the family's favorite Italian restaurant? Sounds great — just know you may have to pay a corking fee.

Increasingly, restaurants of every scale are charging for services we once took for granted. The French Laundry, a four-star eatery in Napa Valley, charges customers \$50 to open an outside bottle. “It's actually a great value,” says the restaurant's sommelier, Bobby Stuckey. “We decant the wine, provide proper glasses for specific varietals, and those glasses wholesale for \$70 apiece. The fee is fair for everyone.”

4. “Our food is sickening.”

On a Sunday night last September, Brad and Julie Welty took their two children out for Chinese food at King Garden in Wooster, Ohio. Within days their younger daughter, four-and-half-year-old Ashley, was hospitalized and diagnosed as having contracted E. coli 0157:H7, which causes a toxin to form in the blood and can lead to kidney failure. Ashley wound up spending two weeks on kidney dialysis; her sister was also hospitalized but with milder symptoms.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's latest estimate is that each year more than 173,000 illnesses are caused by foodborne E. coli in the U.S. While not all cases originate in restaurants, Roy E. Costa, a public health consultant near Orlando, suggests that if your meal seems to be the wrong temperature, don't just return it; demand a whole new dish. “If toxins have already developed,” he says, “they will not be [resolved] through reheating.”

5. “We attract kleptos — and you'll pay for their habits.”

We all know someone who swipes hotel towels. But restaurant cutlery? Meet Jeffrey Seglin. For several years he repeatedly walked out of fancy restaurants (including some located in Hiltons and Ritz-Carltons) with butter knives.

Seglin, who writes a business-ethics column for The New York Times, has since curtailed his sticky-fingered ways. But plenty of diners still leave restaurants with more than full stomachs. Arlene Spiegel, a New York food and beverage consultant, says 2 to 3% of a restaurant's supplies are stolen annually by diners and employees alike. For instance, at the West Street Grill in Litchfield, Conn., owner James O'Shea says klepto diners have taken everything from cutlery to a \$100 bottle of 1995 Chateau Beychevelle. To combat such thievery, Geoffrey Zakarian, chef and owner of New York's Town restaurant, adds an extra 1.5% to food-and-drink charges to compensate for stolen stuff. “And when we see a customer sneaking something into her purse, we put it on the table's check,” says Zakarian. “We tell people they're welcome to the pepper shakers — at \$200 apiece.”