The menu listed Potato Carpaccio with Tuna Tartare. We are all used to the word “tartare” meaning any minced raw food. It’s a term stolen from the dish Steak Tartare, for which beef is blended with raw egg yolk, and sometimes mustard, the whole traditionally garnished or laced with capers, raw diced onion, and chopped parsley. But what, I could not imagine, was Potato Carpaccio?

I happened to know that the word “carpaccio” was first used sometime in the 1950s by Arrigo Cipriani at Harry's Bar in Venice for his creation of thinly sliced raw beef (actually vitellone or yearling calf) topped with Jackson Pollack-like drizzles of mustard mayonnaise. I also know that the word is now applied to any thinly-sliced and somehow creatively-dressed raw food, most frequently beef, but also tuna, salmon, and other fish. I really wanted to order the Tuna Tartare because the composer and executor of this menu was a New York chef who is well-known for his brightly and provocatively seasoned minced raw fish dishes—tartares, if you will. But Potato Carpaccio! Was I required to eat thinly-sliced raw potato with my minced raw fish? I didn’t think I’d like that.

Since my editor has told me that this is a “scholarly journal,” and that I should try to be erudite, not just indig-nant, you will pardon me while I digress with some little-known information about carpaccio that I obtained through primary research: Despite the speculation of other less well-connected food writers—and I have read many spurious explanations of carpaccio—the name “carpaccio” had no culinary meaning before it was used by Arrigo Cipriani. I was told this directly by old man Cipriani himself, while being ferried across the lagoon one day from Piazza San Marco to his eponymous hotel on Giudecca. I am talking here about the father of the current old man Cipriani, the original marketing genius of the family—not that the current Ciprianis are any slouches when it comes to selling themselves. The dish Carpaccio was created by Arrigo to tie into a museum exhibition of the works of the late fifteenth-century Venetian painter Vittore Carpaccio, who is known for his luminous scenes of Venetian life. (Luminous raw meat with painterly squiggles of mayo. Get it?) Incidentally, Carpaccio, the painter that is, was a protégé of Giovanni Bellini, who, along with his father, Jacopo, and brother, Gentile, were also the subjects of a mid twentieth-century exhibition in Venice. Arrigo Cipriani created the famous Bellini cocktail—white peach puree and Prosecco, the Veneto’s sparkling wine—in honor of that show. You know, see the exhibition, drink the drink; a thematic afternoon in Venice.

But back to the new culinary language, by which I mean the new usages that chefs and the media are applying to classic (or, as in the case of carpaccio, at least well-understood) names and words. The new usages do not do what language is supposed to do: communicate. Indeed, they confuse. I am willing to give chefs slight slack on this. They are, for the most part, an uneducated lot. They are taught knife skills, not language skills. Isn’t it enough that they can mince onions? You want them to mince words, too? Why, oh why, however, are magazine and newspaper writers and editors succumbing to such ignorance and restaurant-menu hype? Yes, hype. The aim of the new language is to sell food, just as Arrigo Cipriani did with his language in his day. It doesn’t, once you’ve put fork to mouth in any case, enhance the enjoyment of food, the culture of food, or reflect favorably on the craft of cooking. Let’s face it: Slices of tomato layered with goat cheese sell much faster when called Napoleon of Tomato than when more descriptively billed as slices of tomato layered with goat cheese.

The same can be said of new-wave lasagne. I am talking here about “lasagne” without any pasta, like the layers of fried eggplant and ricotta, roasted red peppers, and grilled zucchini that I ordered recently. Topped with a light tomato sauce, it was in truth a delicious dish, but I was taken aback by the absence of noodles. I thought lasagne were noodles. By definition. The waiter looked at me as if I were a lunatic. “The menu did say eggplant lasagne, sir?”

Speaking of lasagne, how about the new ravioli? One of my criteria for ravioli used to be the edges. Is the pasta thin enough to be doubled up and still remain tender? Now that standard is down the drain. Ravioli in today’s trendy restaurants is likely to be two unattached squares or rounds of pasta—perhaps even wonton skins—with something smeared on the bottom one.
“It’s all a form of stack-age,” said Nancy Oakes, chef-owner of Boulevard in San Francisco, rhyming her newly-coined word with the French word stage, meaning the brief apprenticeships that budding chefs do in master chefs’ kitchens. “They pile a couple ingredients on top of each other and they’ve got a napoleon, or a millefeuille, or lasagne.” I think she was being disdainful, but you never know with chefs.

At least Cipriani created new dishes with new names to sell his food. There must have been a creative-menu-language zeitgeist in the mid 1950s, because, at about the same time, Joe Baum, James Beard, and their cohorts at Restaurant Associates were revolutionizing menu language in New York, creating a new style for menus, a language with the precise purpose of romancing the food so as to sell more of it. In 1957 they opened The Forum of the Caesars, not with Oysters and Clams on the Half-Shell as the dish might have been listed at old-line Delmonico’s, the first grand and respectable restaurant in New York, the model for one hundred years; but with Crustatories—Varied and Gold. As Rozanne Gold, chef, cookbook author, and menu consultant, points out in a 1994 essay on “The Language of Menus,” with the RA group “language became playful, enticing. No broiled spring chicken here, but dishes like Ringneck Pheasant with Brandied Cherries, Baked in Clay and Wild Fowl Cooked in Sherried Tomatoes under a Mantle of Crusty Corn.”

Still, menu language was descriptive, not deceptive. So the baked potatoes were “giant” and “baked in hot ashes.” The point was to make the food sound delicious and interesting, not something other than it was. This style of menu writing continues to this day. Gold quotes a fairly recent Kansas City menu that lists a “boutonniere of young lettuces” and “mosaic of two salmons.”

Menu language became even more wordy and descriptive, but much less romantic, in the mid 1970s, when Alice Waters and other California restaurateurs began making a fetish of the wholesome, or at least local, origins of their ingredients. In New York, Larry Forgione, then at the River Cafe in Brooklyn, did the same. This was the beginning of the New American Cuisine that is still with us, emphasizing the freshness, seasonality, and local origins of ingredients.

The buzz word for this these days is Sustainable Cuisine. This means that it isn’t enough to know that there is “farm-fresh” lettuce and “vine-ripened” tomato in the salad; we have to know at which local farm each was grown, and perhaps that we are saving the earth while eating endangered (“heirloom”) varieties. It isn’t enough to have lamb on the menu; we have to provide the name of the ranch where it grazed. It isn’t enough to eat clams; we have to know from which bay they were dug. For more than two decades, that’s the way menus have been written.

There is such a thing as menu-language fashion, though, and the reaction to the long-skirted descriptions of the ’70s and ’80s was the 1992 mini-skirt menu language of restaurant revolutionary Jean-Georges Vongerichten. His menu at Jo-Jo, his bistro on the upper East Side of Manhattan, cut to the chase. It listed Chicken, Veal, Fish, etc., single words in large boldface letters. These were followed, under the single words, by the sparsest mentions of the side dish in smaller, lighter print. I’ve seen this style copied elsewhere, but it has never caught on. Chefs and restaurateurs still feel compelled to romance the food, to sell it somehow.

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And a well-written menu can be fun to read. Recently, at Pinot Blanc, Joachim Splichal’s restaurant in Napa Valley, I felt I was going to enjoy the restaurant before I ate a bite. The menu made me laugh. Among the first courses was High Cholesterol Foie Gras.

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Given the history, we have to expect menu language to change with the times. One can, however, rightly expect chefs to get their culinary technique terms correct. Braising, for example, is, according to any culinary text or dictionary you look in, cooking a food first in fat— theoretically to seal in juices, to firm up the proteins, to caramelize the surface, to bring out flavor… there are various reasons given—then cooking it in a small amount of liquid, generally to finish the cooking so the food tenderizes. Braising is not simply cooking in liquid, as many chefs today seem to think. Covering meat with broth and simmering away is not braising. It’s not poaching, either, as some will have it. Poaching is cooking in a liquid at a temperature below or barely at boiling.

As I go bonkers when I get a bowl of soupy stew that’s been called “braised oxtails in Merlot,” Anne Willan, founder of La Varenne, the vaunted cooking school, and a board member of the organization that helps sponsor this very journal, worries about “blanquettes that are not white, croustillants that are not crispy, millefeuilles that have nothing to do with 1,000 leaves” and the rampant misuse of the term “roasting.” “Proper roasting,” she says properly (she’s English), “should be done on a spit. Foods cooked in the oven should be called ‘baked.’” Of course, as both Anne and you know, “baked whole sea bass” sounds much more prosaic than “roasted whole sea bass.”

Anne asks too much, though. As long as the “roast” was cooked in a dry pan, not in liquid, I can give up the spit.

I am not willing, however, to let any and all fish stews be called bouillabaisse. On a recent trip to the French Riviera, a dear friend who has certainly eaten around, just not that much in the south of France, was thrilled and that I never know the meaning of anymore: confit, barigoule, ragout, fricassee. And the list is not reserved for French dishes and terms, either. Ordering in an Italian restaurant, I find myself behaving like the food allergics, fat phobics, and others who question waiters about every last ingredient in a dish. I never know anymore what is meant by Fettuccine Alfredo or Spaghetti Carbonara. I ask whether the Rigatoni Arrabiata has any hot pepper in it. I wonder at what Monk Fish Osso Buco is.

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote, in The Physiology of Taste, that “The invention of a new dish brings more to the good of mankind than the discovery of a new star.” If he lived in our day he might not have gone out on a limb like that, but he certainly didn’t mean that there was honor in putting new names on old things.

I am old enough to remember when you could order a Caesar salad and it was prepared tableside, with flourish and drama, as it was originally at Caesar’s Place that fateful July 4, 1929, weekend when Caesar Cardini ran out of real food, rolled out the gueridons, and prepared this bit of greenery to feed his Hollywood-based habitué. It is much too much to expect that kind of showmanship today, but I should fairly be able to anticipate a Romaine salad tossed with an egg-enriched oil and lemon juice dressing touched with mustard and Worcestershire sauce, graced with gratings of parmesan, and garnished with croutons. The anchovy isn’t original to Caesar. It became part of the salad later. But I’m happy with that, too. Any old creamy, garlicky dressing is not Caesar salad, though. And Caesar croutons do not mean slices of soggy toast with cold melted cheese, or a slather of olive paste. I’m not even going to start about the most ubiquitous of all Caesar variations, the grilled chicken Caesar.

I suppose I shouldn’t get into culinary preparation complaints at all when I am supposed to be incensed about menu language. Like how about Cobb salad, that treasure created at the Brown Derby in 1937? Order that these days and your guess is as good as anybody’s about what you’ll get.

Here’s another classic appellation that is misapplied so often lately it no longer has meaning. I have been running across things Tatin, such as the Endive Tatin I saw on a menu the other day. Querying the waiter about what this was and how it might relate to the famous Tarte Tatin—the upside-down, caramelized apple tart named after the Tatin sisters who created it in their restaurant in Lamotte-Beuvron, in the Sologne—I surmised that the dish was braised endive. No pastry was involved. I supposed the fact that the vegetable was caramelized gave the chef license to Tatin it.

I could cite some other words that chefs use with abandon and that I never know the meaning of anymore: confit, barigoule, ragout, fricassee. And the list is not reserved for French dishes and terms, either. Ordering in an Italian restaurant, I find myself behaving like the food allergics, fat phobics, and others who question waiters about every last ingredient in a dish. I never know anymore what is meant by Fettuccine Alfredo or Spaghetti Carbonara. I ask whether the Rigatoni Arrabiata has any hot pepper in it. I wonder at what Monk Fish Osso Buco is.