

BY STEVE SCHIMOLER



QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ The food industry's struggle to find the language for describing flavor
- ▶ How the wine world has succeeded in bringing flavors and aromas to life
- ▶ Ways to achieve a more flavorful vocabulary for marketing cuisine

*Menu marketers could learn a lot
from the rich vocabulary of wine*

LET'S TALK *Flavor*

*E*yes closed, you pass it under your nose and inhale, driving the aromas deep into your sinuses, sending the volatiles back to the section of your brain that starts to process and analyze the aromatic messages. Smoky notes hit first, and then pepper tingles, exposing the light vegetals as you breathe them in, preparing yourself for the first taste of the nectar.

You take a small taste and lightly pull air over your palate as you begin to release the layers of flavor waiting to be explored and discovered. You start digging in and dissecting the layers and are struck with the underlying smokiness and rich, beef-like flavors.

There are hints of fresh grass, wisps of black pepper and a light acidity and earthiness that remind you of ripe summer tomatoes.

The basic terms for describing how foods taste — sweet, salty, bitter, sour and umami — don't begin to convey the many layers of flavor a menu item offers.

At the finish, there is a pleasant, yeasty sweetness with subtle hints of caramelization. You repeat the exercise several times and continue to unwrap the flavors as the temperature changes, revealing the subtleties within. You challenge yourself to identify and mentally catalog the tastes and sensations, all the while trying to articulate the flavors.

While this tasting ritual could easily describe an experience with a Cabernet Sauvignon or a big earthy Syrah, it's actually my tasting notes from a recent encounter with a Whopper with cheese, eaten while stranded at Boston's Logan Airport for a few hours.

Idle time allows me to wander off into tangential areas, and in this case I began to consider why we have not done a better job describing the foods we create and marketing and selling them in a more colorful, flavor-driven language. If I can wax poetic about a Whopper with cheese and associate the flavors with the romantic descriptors usually reserved for wine banter, think of what you can do for your menu or your next advertising campaign.

MISSING THE FLAVOR MESSAGE

Marketing food is big business, yet most marketing efforts rarely, if ever, attempt to present flavor as the merit of the product. Watching commercials peppered throughout TV-land, I often wonder who in their right mind approves the final copy for material that is driven on a "deal" or by some ridiculous lifestyle come-on. We know we can buy one pizza and get another for five bucks, and we're led to believe that drinking a certain soft drink will make us a better skateboarder, but do we know what the pizza or the soda will taste like?

Words like "juicy" and "zesty" are typically as far as any flavor descriptors go, in spite of a whole language of flavor. Restaurant operators are equally remiss in not challenging their own ability to communicate flavor as the true



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point of difference and ultimate value of the food on their menus.

As an industry, we have yet to leverage the value of communicating taste and flavor to our customers. We have not taken the next steps in educating them to understand flavor or feel comfortable in talking about flavor, and these shortcomings are due mostly to our own lack of confidence to do so effectively.

WORD POWER FROM WINE

Maybe it's time to take a page from the wine book, or a spin on its wheel, if you will. The wine aroma wheel, developed as recently as the 1980s, is a great tool and could certainly be applied to describing food flavors. However, there are considerably more food ingredients than grape varietals, and the process of cooking expands the flavor possibilities exponentially, unlocking infinite iterations of flavor that have yet to be articulated as recorded points of reference.

Consider the central descriptors in the wine aroma wheel — fruity, nutty, spicy, floral, vegetative, woody, caramelized and earthy, as well as the less marketable terms like chemical, pungent, oxidized and microbiological. They form a foundation for describing foods in a more accurate fashion than the basic sweet, salty, bitter, sour and umami on which tastes have had to rely.

If the descriptors further out on the aroma wheel were expanded to include cooking

To market a menu effectively, make flavor the big selling point.

techniques and ingredient flavor profiles, it could become a strong base for building a full flavor vocabulary.

A SHALLOW VOCABULARY

As we all become more sophisticated eaters, it is not enough simply to say that there's cinnamon in the braised lamb shank; we need to be able to describe what cinnamon tastes like in the first place. Is it Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian? Is it from the bottom of the tree or off the branches near the top? Has it been dried properly so it does not taste of must and mildew?

Similarly, basil shows up in abundance on menus everywhere, but the great taste differences between globe, opal, cinnamon and Thai basil are never verbally exploited.

How do you describe star anise, or the difference between black pepper and white pepper, Brie versus Camembert, Stilton versus Roquefort, ancho versus guajillo, bluefin versus bigeye? How do we verbally identify valuable and discernable flavor iterations?

Virtually every ingredient we use has numerous strains within its species or style, and each holds variables that deliver different profiles. Yet, when it comes down to it, our flavor vocabulary is actually quite shallow. Hanging around flavor specialists can add depth to the list, but then you run the risk of hearing phrases like “wet dog hair,” “soggy cardboard” or even “baby puke” describing lipase found in cheese. While these may accurately and dramatically define the flavors, they are not exactly marketing gems for advertising copy or menu highlights.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

I believe the food world is at an impasse. We're beginning to truly understand the power and magic of flavor in new and different ways. Technology is unlocking the physiological mysteries behind human reactions to flavor and the way our brains process the combination of sensory experiences during the eating function. As we continue to understand more about

our neurological relation to food and flavor, we must also learn how to communicate our findings.

There are high-tech methods that can extract, analyze and identify every compound of an ingredient. We can even reassemble artificial stand-ins for mimicking the real flavors.

Yet the comparatively low-tech process of describing the flavor nuances of individual ingredients can come only with endless tastings, excellent recall from previous tastings and stored points of reference that can conjure up similarities from other ingredients. The industry needs to develop a marketable flavor vocabulary by expanding consumer-based sensory evaluations and focus-group tastings. These exercises need to go further to engage in more in-depth flavor experimentations and interactive functions that can help build a layman's guide to flavor.

We have an arsenal of new technological resources to leverage for learning and teaching about flavor. We all need to become better students so we can become the teachers as well.

Marketing departments and advertising agencies could really use more food expertise and less “Madison Avenue” when developing their very costly advertising campaigns. Just as it took time to integrate culinary perspective into the food-manufacturing world, I bet we will soon see culinologists being hired to fill the marketing gaps and provide real flavor to the menu and the advertising campaigns to promote the menu.

The food media have exploded over the past 10 years; unfortunately, shows like “Hell's Kitchen” or “Rocco's Nightmare” focused on everything but the food and flavor in the kitchen. The proliferation of cooking shows tends to provide good entertainment but has yet to highlight flavor as the star of the show.

The recent hit movie “Sideways” did a great job of bringing the flavor of wine into the story in a realistic and engaging way. I can only hope that the food industry will borrow from the world of wine — its fruity and smoky notes, its aroma wheel and its portrayal in the media — to better understand the concept of creatively selling flavor, and enlighten chefs, food scientists, culinologists and marketing executives everywhere. ☺

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TAKE-AWAY TIPS

- ▶ **TAKE A SPIN:** The wine aroma wheel is a great example of how to discuss the complex taste of food
- ▶ **SAY IT WITH FLAVOR:** Use more expressive flavor descriptors in marketing and on menus