
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

How the language of menus matters



This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Beth

And I'm Beth.

Neil

Would you like some fried chicken and chips with gravy, Beth?

Beth

No thanks, Neil. I don't really like fried chicken. It's too oily for me.

Neil

Okay, no problem. But, maybe you'd like some organic poulet roti in a tender meat jus with frites?

Beth

Ooh! Now, that sounds interesting. What is it?

Neil

Well, it's French for... chicken and chips with gravy! It's a strange fact but the same dish described using different words can make it sound more delicious, more exotic and more desirable.

Beth

Restaurants think carefully about the language they use to describe the food on their menus, trying to make it sound appealing, tasty or poetic. Instead of hamburgers, we have 'gourmet burgers', it's 'jus' not gravy, and raspberry 'coulis' sounds a lot tastier than raspberry sauce.

Neil

Many of the words used to describe **gourmet** food - that's food which is higher-quality and more sophisticated than usual - are French, coming from a country with a long tradition of high-level cooking called *haute cuisine*.

Beth

But how does the language used to describe food affect our psychology, and help restaurants make menus which are both tempting and profitable? That's what we'll be finding out in this programme, along with some useful new vocabulary as well. But first I have a question for you, Neil. To train as a classical French chef takes months as a full-time apprentice, but what is the name of the most famous cooking school teaching French *haute cuisine*? Is it:

- a) Le Cordon Bleu?
- b) Le Cordon Rouge? or,
- c) Le Cordon Noir?

Neil

Well, I think it's le Cordon Bleu.

Beth

OK, Neil, I'll reveal the correct answer later. It's important for restaurants to describe items on the menu so diners know what to expect, and many chefs think foreign words sound more exciting. But according to linguist, Dr Keri Matwick, the use of French is decreasing. Here, Keri explains why to Ruth Alexander, presenter of BBC World Service programme, The Food Chain:

Dr Keri Matwick

Yeah, there are studies that show that because it sounds **fancier**, you know, therefore... French food has long been considered the gourmet food, and it *was*

popular. But I would say in now there's a tendency to not use French because it sounds **pretentious**.

Ruth Alexander

So it can **turn** a diner **off**.

Neil

Many restaurants use French names in menus because they sound **fancy**, an adjective meaning special or unusual, with lots of decoration. Keri disagrees. She thinks French names used to be popular but are now seen as **pretentious**. If something is **pretentious**, it tries to appear more important or clever than it really is.

Beth

Some diners like the French names, but it **turns** other diners **off**. If something **turns** you **off**, it makes you stop feeling interested or excited.

Neil

Brazilian chef Caroline Martins agrees that using French names in menus is becoming a thing of the past. Caroline has stopped using French names in her pop-up restaurant, Sampa, in Manchester, as she explained to Ruth Alexander, for BBC World Service programme The Food Chain:

Caroline Martins

I am classically trained in French cuisine. I was using a lot of French terms, you know, and that wasn't very welcome. People would be very confused, they would ask me, 'Oh, what is this *brunoise*? What is this *chiffonade*?' They would definitely avoid the dishes, or they would be **sarcastic** as well about it, you know. I had people booking a table, sitting down, and then they start seeing all these French terms, and they just leave. Yes, yes, I had that happening.

Ruth Alexander

You had people walking out of the restaurant? They just think, 'This isn't for me!'.

Caroline Martins

'This isn't for me!...What is this...?' You know, 'What am I eating? I wanna eat food, I don't wanna eat names, **posh** names, you know.'

Beth

Instead of feeling excited about dishes described in French, Caroline's diners were **sarcastic** about them, they mocked and made fun of them. Some diners even walked out!

Neil

Caroline thinks French makes her cooking sound too **posh**, too fashionable, expensive and not available to everyone. She has now started using English and her native Brazilian Portuguese on the menu and is pleased with the results – customers don't feel confused, and their curiosity about the Brazilian dishes starts a conversation with the waiter.

Beth

Hmm, all this talk of food is making me hungry, Neil. Anyway, it's time to reveal the answer to my question. What's the name of the famous French cooking school that teaches *haute cuisine*?

Neil

I said it was Le Cordon Bleu. Was I right?

Beth

Le Cordon Bleu was... the correct answer! The famous culinary arts school, Le Cordon Bleu, first opened its doors in Paris in 1895. OK, let's recap the vocabulary we've learned from this programme, starting with **gourmet food**, food which is better quality and more sophisticated than usual, and is often more expensive.

Neil

The adjective, **fancy**, means special, unusual, and decorative.

Beth

If someone is **pretentious**, they try to appear more important or clever than they really are.

Neil

The phrase, to **turn someone off**, means to make someone stop feeling interested or excited.

Beth

If you say something **sarcastic**, you mock and insult something by saying the opposite of what you mean.

Neil

And finally, the adjective **posh** means fashionable, smart, expensive and exclusive. Once again, our six minutes are up! Join us again soon for more trending topics and useful vocabulary, here at 6 Minute English. Goodbye for now!

Beth

Bye!

VOCABULARY

gourmet food

high-quality food which is more unusual or sophisticated than ordinary food, and is often more expensive

fancy

special, unusual, and decorative

pretentious

trying to appear more important or clever than it really is

turn (someone) off

cause someone to stop feeling interested or excited

sarcastic

mocking and insulting by saying the opposite of what you really mean

posh

fashionable, smart, expensive and exclusive