A Roast by Any Other Name

When New Yorkers read a menu they know perfectly well that Mom never saw that "home-made, farm-apple pie" and they may even know that the apples came not from any bushel basket with the crisp fragrance of fall, but from a can. Still, hope springs eternal in the human stomach. Even when "fresh gifts from the bounty of the sea" are clearly frozen and factory-prepared and "bouquets of green vegetables" are pre-cooked and pre-packaged, most people do not lightly abandon their vision of sun-ripened fruits and just-caught fish. New Yorkers dine on hyperbole and disappointment.

Now it is proposed that restaurant customers be told the awful truth. A bill that would prohibit false or misleading descriptions on New York restaurant menus has been introduced in the City Council, and even some restaurateurs (6,000 of them, statewide) feel that things have gone a bit too far. In addition to the city law, an industry proposal for "accuracy in menus" would at least assure the patron that his lobster really came from Maine and his potato from Idaho. By then, his illusions might be gone, but he could work up an appetite figuring out the unit pricing of his steak, the service charges printed in clear type and the Health Department inspection reports.

But any food buff knows that more is wrong with restaurant menus than words. The "succulent, Continental specialités de la maison" are actually factory-frozen mass-produced products sent to restaurants for defrosting and reheating. Food professionals grow enthusiastic about the development of cheeseless cheeses, synthetic sauces and machines that produce instant mashed potatoes from a spigot. To explain all this on a menu would require a dissertation and a helping of antacids. Honest descriptions are fine, but honest food would be better.