

FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT and HOTEL FRONT

at what price success?

MINCING NO WORDS CONSULTANT CLARK WOLF MUSES ON HOW WE FEEL ABOUT WHAT WE PAY.

On my very first visit to a new client's seaside property, I got the grand tour from the executive chef. As we tromped across plush carpet into the ocean-view cafe, we passed huge armchairs at oversized tables under a mass of crystal chandelier. I turned calmly to my jovial, rotund host and said, "I feel that I am about to be overcharged." Why? Because perception is nine-tenths of the lunch.

For the past decade, the buzzword, with good reason, has been "value." It all boils down to not only *what* things cost but—in restaurants, lounges, hotels, casinos, and wherever we gather to consume mass quantities of edibles—*why*?

No matter what the indicators say, the price of upscale eat and drink has been steadily climbing. I'm not talking about soda and Snackwells, I'm talking about the kind of foie gras fine dining being enjoyed by everyone from Midwestern matrons to Nevada high rollers, from Bay Area foodies to Seattle cybergeeks. While the taste for good tastes has exploded all across America, the pesky relationship between price and value has begun to fray. People are starting to get confused and cranky, even if they seem happy enough to pony up for a \$12 cocktail.

When it comes to culinary consumption it's not futures we consider, it's the value of right now's quaff and crunch. That's why a perfect hot (not scalding) espresso with chocolaty hints and luscious foamy *crema* is well worth \$3.50. But a tepid, watery paper eyecup of acrid brew is suitable cause for depression, divorce, or worse. By the same token, when the meal is superior, the service invisibly sublime, the room spectacular, the conversation sterling, and even the people at the next table seem special and cute, the bill is hardly reviewed. It's never just a matter of price, but also product and place. Sometimes, and especially above a certain price point, they find a precarious balance.

On the flip side, too cheap is scary too. Once upon a cheese counter, I attempted to retail a wheel of something called Italian Fontal. I couldn't give it away until I fashioned a sign that read: "Just arrived. Only 22 lbs left. \$8.50 per lb." It fairly flew out the door (and worth every penny). We used to call it the "Gucci factor,"

or value by association to price. Some years later, just prior to the current restaurant boom, I was in Las Vegas, lazing by a spectacular water feature aside an edificial replication (OK, lying by the pool at the Luxor pyramid) when a barely clad cutie offered to deliver a libation. Feeling tropical, I went for a rum and Coke. The tab said \$2.18! "I don't wish to imbibe at that price!" I bellowed, without a shred of gallantry (and in a fairly small Speedo). "What rotgut rum is this?" Needless to say, things were soon to change, and now some superior meals and world-class wines take up space between the artifacts and the replicas, the grand theatrics and the game tables.



In every instance, from a \$30 truffle soup to the blue plate special, from a \$6,000 Bordeaux to a pound of takeout potato salad, edibles *especially* need to pass the straight-face test. Can the waiter offer it without a smirk? Do you dispose of the receipt before your wife goes through your pockets? Can it go on the expense account? Do you need to say "the heck with it" before diving in? Can you say that price out loud without laughing?

In the perilous later '80s, a Manhattan hot spot happily charged \$32.50 for a pleasant plate of crisply roasted chicken and fairly delicious french fries. Come the Crash of '87, that platter suddenly sold for under 20 bucks. People were livid, and the place soon closed. Folks complained of feeling they'd been had, while the owner whined, "But they'd never pay the old price now." Right on both counts.

So, in this era of oenophilic expansiveness and gustatory acrobatics, it's not just the buyer but also the seller who must beware. Make sure what you proffer is truly worth the tab. Focus on the long term, even when the quick cash-in seems easy enough. Try to make customers for life, and work toward being financially solid and headache free in the morning of the next millennium.

Clark Wolf is a longtime food and restaurant consultant based in New York City and a columnist for *Forbes*.