

## Magic Menu Words



The essence of a diner's restaurant experience is, of course, the food. But first come the words that describe the food. Operators know the importance of employing the right buzzwords on their menu or menu board—and then following through with items that truly fulfill the promise implied by the words.

These power words change from year to year and from season to season, however. For that matter, so do the meanings of particular food terms in the minds of consumers. It's not always easy for operators to stay ahead of the competition by seizing on the most powerful menu descriptors. It's even harder to understand exactly what these buzzwords are leading consumers to expect from the menu, and therefore to represent the restaurant's offerings accurately as well as to the best advantage.

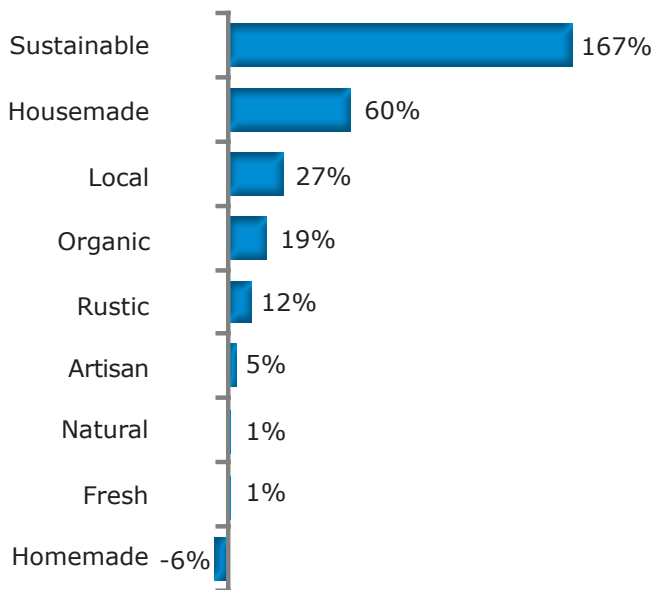
Fortunately, both consumer research and comparative menu research can help operators identify the latest menu buzzwords, quantify their power over consumers, and understand the ideas that these words represent to diners. Let's take a look at what the latest research shows, and how operators can use today's menu buzzwords to their best advantage.

# Housemade and Homemade

Despite today's leaner times, research shows that dining out remains an important lifestyle choice for the vast majority of consumers. Yet there's also a recession-induced mania for homestyle comfort foods, as well as the pampering represented by "made for you" fare. How does all this play out on menus? There has been an interesting transition from "homemade"—a term that will always retain power but is now seen as something of a cliché—to "housemade"—a more current term with the added implication of culinary skills in the professional kitchen. Data mining of menus shows that mentions of "housemade" items are up 60% in 2010, while the number of items described as "homemade" dropped 6%.

## Percentage Change in Incidence of Key Menu Descriptors

Jan-June 2009–Jan-June 2010



Source: Technomic MenuMonitor database

**Signature housemade items—particularly sauces—also offer potential to extend a restaurant's brand into a line of retail products.**

Many of today's menus promote housemade sauces and dips, including housemade versions of items that consumers are

used to seeing in their bottled versions, such as ketchups, aiolis and barbecue sauces, all of which can lend signature attributes to standard dishes. Some recent examples from chain restaurants:

- **Barbecue Grilled Chicken**—all-natural chicken breast, seasoned and grilled, then smothered in **housemade** Boston barbecue sauce
- **Buffalo Shrimp**—served with celery and a **housemade** Cheddar and blue-cheese dressing
- **BBLT Sandwich**—double portion of applewood-smoked bacon, lettuce, locally grown tomatoes and **housemade** cracked-pepper-and-balsamic mayonnaise served warm on Mom's White Toast

## Artisan and Rustic

As part of this new emphasis on "housemade" items, many operators are also highlighting on their menus specific in-house preparation steps, such as "hand-cut" or "hand-breaded." Even fast-food operators have the chance to differentiate themselves here; for instance, one chain recently launched new Hand-Breaded Chicken Tenders at stores nationwide.

Another menu term that carries implications of premium positioning as well as professional skills in the kitchen is "artisan." The term can also connote a return to pre-industrial ways of doing things, particularly when it's paired with another of today's power words: "rustic." Menu analysis shows that the number of items described as "artisan" items on menus is up 5% this year, with the number of items labeled as "rustic" up 12%.

"Artisan" and "rustic" items and ingredients may be perceived as "better for you"; convey unique artistic appeal; resonate as authentically

ethnic; provide points of differentiation; and give the impression of gourmet positioning that can command higher price points. Exhibition preparation—including fresh pasta demonstrations, bread carving stations and hand-sliced charcuterie—may be one aspect of artisan appeal.

Pizza is one menu category where artisan and rustic positioning has powerful appeal, sometimes in combination with exhibition baking in a showy wood-burning pizza oven. Rustic and artisan pizzas often are priced similarly to standard

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pizza offerings, meaning added value for consumers. To create this authentic positioning, restaurants are adding imported meats and cheeses; incorporating bolder flavors and ethnic ingredients; and creating more complex crusts with

signature flavors and textures. Pizza Inn added a limited-time line of Rustic Italian Pizzas, all with a crust brushed with rosemary- and garlic-infused oil and topped with mozzarella cheese, and Mazzio's Italian Eatery launched a line of Artisan Pizzas prepared with fresh-made dough topped with a blend of cheeses and finished with garlic butter and a dusting of toasted herbs.

The sandwich category is another hot spot for "artisan" and "rustic" labeling, underlying the promise that the menu item will offer the quality, freshness and uniqueness that sandwich consumers crave in both fillings and bread. Boudin SF recently added three new artisan sandwiches, including the Fra' Mani Artisan Ham & Brie featuring Fra' Mani rosemary ham, Brie, Dijon mustard, dried cranberries, mayonnaise and watercress.

A First Lady who's an organic gardener—that's just one highly visible manifestation of Americans' fast-changing ideas about agriculture and food sourcing. The consumer backlash against our highly mechanized food chain has been ongoing for some time now, but areas of concern are evolving. A few years ago, it was enough for operators to label an item as "natural"—a slippery term that has no regulatory definition—but the term seems to be losing its power; this year, menu mentions of "natural" foods are up only 1%. On the other hand, foods labeled as "organic"—a precise term implying specific agricultural practices and backed up by government certification—are up 12% in 2010 despite the fact that organic foods and ingredients are usually significantly more expensive than their "conventional" counterparts. Indeed, diners' interest in organic foods seems almost recession-proof. For instance, recent pizza research by Technomic showed that three out of 10 consumers are enthusiastic about trying organic pizza toppings and crusts.

Conscious consumers, however, have gone beyond a focus on what does or doesn't go into the food they eat. Instead, they've become more aware of the food delivery system and its implications for both food quality and hidden costs. Foods labeled as locally sourced hit many consumer sweet spots. Not only are they seen as fresher, but they also require less fuel to get from farm to plate (thus reducing their "carbon footprint"). In addition, operators who publicize the foods and ingredients they purchase from local farmers, growers and processors are seen as promoting the local economy. Menu mentions of "local" items are up 27% this year over last. Mentions of items that are "sustainable" or "sustainably sourced," though still fairly rare on mainstream menus, are up 167% over 2009.

Concepts often promote local and sustainable fare as part of an overall "green" competitive

## Green Power: Natural, Organic, Local, Sustainable—*continued*

positioning that may also encompass other practices such as recycling or fuel efficiency.

***Eco-friendly from the start: To burnish a concept's "green" credentials, more and more restaurant units are built to specifications for LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification.***

One such concept is Burgerville, based in the Pacific Northwest. It serves and promotes food that is seasonal, organic and sourced from the Pacific Northwest whenever possible; units make use of local wind power and stores employ composting and recycling.

The Green Restaurant Association, which offers a green-restaurant certification program and listing, is a valued Sysco iCare partner. It claims to have the world's largest database of environmental solutions for the restaurant industry. The GRA is a resource available to all Sysco customers and can be reached at [www.dinegreen.com](http://www.dinegreen.com), or with the help of your Sysco Marketing Associate.

## What's the Next Buzz?

The ideas illustrated by words like "housemade," "artisan," "rustic," "organic," "local" and "sustainable" are powerful, and most of them will have durable menu appeal. But the specific marketing buzzwords that can trigger consumers' patronage and purchases are always in the process of evolving. Operators who hope to stay ahead of the curve with the most appealing menus and marketing need to be cognizant of the latest "power" words—and sensitive to what consumers are really seeking when they respond to such terms.

## Sysco Can Help

It's not easy for independent operators to craft a menu or menu board with the business-boosting buzzwords that hit all the "sweet spots" for today's consumers. It's even harder to back up the menu with crowd-pleasing offerings that accurately fulfill the promises made.

Fortunately, Sysco's Marketing Associates stand ready to help, backed up by Sysco's vast network of foodservice experts. Marketing Associates attend intensive, year-round training sessions and product-knowledge seminars to stay on top of the latest trends and innovations in the marketplace. One of the most valuable services led by Sysco's Marketing Associates is the system of Sysco Business Reviews, in which culinary, operational and marketing advisors review every aspect of an independent restaurateur's business and then make suggestions to optimize their bottom line. In addition, Sysco's iCare partnerships provide independent restaurateurs with connections to business partners such as Focus Marketing, Moving Targets and SuperMedia. These iCare partners are available to provide marketing, operational and financial services to help compete against the "big guys." For more information, contact your Marketing Associate or go to [www.syscoicare.com](http://www.syscoicare.com).



**COMING NEXT MONTH:** Catering with a focus on the holidays.