

Many of us read all we can. Sometimes that is very little for me. But when I read, I usually find myself reading about food, wine and related matters. That's OK. It's not really work. It satisfies a passion while informing me about what I do every day.

Frequently I review menus from well-known restaurants and chefs, especially those in New Orleans. It's interesting to see what others are serving and what their guests enjoy.

Many menus carry words regarding charges for substitutions. Even though a guest should expect to pay for substituting, stating it gets you around them not knowing or a server having to remind the guest.

Substitutions are the scourge of kitchens. Even if there is an additional charge, vile words will be uttered about you. Sometimes the selection is the subject of great laughter. Most kitchen humor is not very sophisticated.

Not too long ago I read a great phrase on a menu. Instead of addressing substitution with charges or the "no substitutions" phrase, the words "Trust the Chef" were printed along the bottom.

What a great thought. It's nice, clever and polite. And it goes right to the point.

In most every case, a food professional has spent lots of time and effort in preparing a menu. Not just the recipes for each dish and its components. But also the way everything goes together and ties together in the whole. The larger the menu, the more complicated the task.

A good menu utilizes ingredients to the fullest to control costs – the restaurants and yours. If they have to spend more, so will you.

That's the reason for a charge being made for substituting. An item that was supposed to be sold is now not going out. And one that was supposed to remain for another dish is going out with this one.

So now the planning number is off by two. Do this five times and it's off by ten. The fact that the cost of one is probably greater than the other adds another dimension to the situation.

Kitchens plan very carefully how much to order and prepare. There's not a little farm out back where they can go pick some extra or a stream to catch a few more trout. In turn everything that must be thrown out has a 100% food cost. There's not much place for leftovers on a restaurant menu.

When you look at a dish that comes with two sides, remember that they were chosen for a reason. Go with it. If you are prepared to be happy rather than grumpy, chances are you will be pleased.

The even greater offender is the guest who wants to remake the kitchen's dishes. They want the spicing different. They want it cooked differently. They want the sauce on the side or a different one entirely.

During June at Jimmy's we served grilled salmon with avocado, roasted red pepper and cilantro salsa. It was a great summer-time dish. The colors looked really good together. The flavors melded very well.

One night a guest decided she wanted Cajun seasoning on her salmon. My comment out loud in the kitchen was, "That's not a very good idea." My reasoning was that the flavors wouldn't work as well, it wouldn't look as good – no visible grill marks and that those heavy spices would require too long to cook out the rawness of their flavors.

A few minutes later, back came the salmon. The lady didn't like it. It was overcooked. Now she wanted to try the trout.

It was her fault. She changed the way the dish was designed and the cooking time. It was also my server's fault for allowing her to make the change without a warning. If he had asked me, I would have talked to the guest before letting her go down that bumpy road.

Getting sauce on the side is not usually a good idea. At Jimmy's we season our food. We season the components. We season the sauces. They are a part of the dish – not something that is plopped on top like a shot of ketchup on a burger.

A sauce put on freshly cooked food marries into the flesh with the heat from one or both. The sauce softens or melts as the two become one. If you get it in a little dish, you have spoiled the effect the chef created.

If you are scared of the sauce and don't trust the chef, order something else. Whatever you do don't order it with no sauce. That's a sure recipe for disappointment. You'll go away mumbling about dry and flavorless food. No wonder. You did it.

Exception – sweet is not for you. Here's one for us savory folks.

My friend David Weiss served a great first course of fried calamari. We really enjoyed them. The sauce he served was a very sweet apricot-based concoction. The hot calamari were put on top of a plate covered with the sauce. You couldn't get away from it. If you wanted something heavy and sweet, it was perfect.

Calamari to me needs a light touch – lemon and maybe a little olive oil and garlic. Or perhaps a little cup of marinara or a spicy something to dip a few in. The apricot sauce would have been great on an English muffin but overpowered the calamari to me. I'm one of those savory is usually better people. David was always very nice to bring our calamari without the sauce and a little lemon.

If you want to be extra safe, eat the same food every week, read the same book and wear the same outfits. If you watch re-runs of your favorite TV shows, you'll never be disappointed. Jerry Orbach's one liner just before the "bum, bum," will always please you even though the twin towers are sadly missing now.

On the other hand, you can trust the chefs, authors and others in your life. Have some adventure. Have some respect for them. Try new things. Don't be afraid you won't like something as well as another dish.

I have lots of favorites. I've had lots of memorable meals and many glasses of good wine. Yet I am always in search of a new favorite. Try something new and different. I think you'll be better for it. And you'll have lots more fun.