DISH DIRECTORY — GUIDE

Common Menu Terms Explained

Menu words like market price, a la carte, and prix fixe describe how dishes are priced and served, so learn them to order with confidence.

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Restaurant menus use a shorthand of pricing phrases, kitchen words, and serving styles that can confuse even experienced diners. Learning a few common terms helps you understand what you will get, how it is priced, and what to ask. This guide explains the words you will see most often.

How Dishes Are Priced

Pricing terms tell you how the final bill is built, so read them before you choose.

- Market price means the price is not printed because the ingredient cost changes often. It is common for fresh seafood and some premium cuts, so always ask the current price before ordering.
- A la carte means every item is priced on its own. You pick a main dish and add sides separately, and each choice adds to the check.
- Prix fixe means a fixed price for a set menu, usually with several courses. You often get a choice of dishes within each course.
- Service charge is a fee the restaurant adds to the bill on its own. It is different from a voluntary tip, and policies vary by place, so ask if you are unsure what is included.

How Meals Are Structured

These terms describe the order and size of what arrives at your table.

- Starter or appetizer is a small first course before the main dish. Some tables order several starters to share.
- Main course is the central dish of the meal. Note that the word entree means the main course in many countries but a starter in others, so ask when you dine somewhere new.
- Tasting menu is a series of small courses chosen by the chef. It lets you try many dishes in one visit, and the whole table often orders it together.
- Set menu is a limited group of courses offered together at one price. Restaurants often offer one at lunch or early evening seatings.

Words About Ingredients

Ingredient words describe where food comes from and how it was raised or made.

- Seasonal means the dish features ingredients at their peak right now. Seasonal menus change through the year as availability shifts.
- Locally sourced means ingredients come from nearby producers. How near that means varies

widely, so treat it as a general sign rather than a promise.

- House made means the item is prepared in the restaurant rather than bought ready made. It often covers bread, desserts, sauces, and cured items.
- Words such as organic or farm raised describe how ingredients were produced. Standards behind these words vary by place, so check locally if the distinction matters to you.

Words About Cooking Methods

Cooking words tell you about flavor and texture, which helps you pick dishes you will enjoy.

- Grilled and roasted use dry heat and often give a crisp or charred surface. Braised and poached use liquid and tend to give soft, tender results.
- Raw preparations include words like ceviche, tartare, carpaccio, and sashimi. These dishes are not cooked with heat, so ask about freshness if you are unsure.
- Al dente describes pasta or vegetables cooked so they keep a slight bite. It is a texture choice, not a sign of undercooking.

What to Ask Your Server

When a menu word is unclear, a short question prevents a surprise.

- Ask the price of anything listed as market price.
- Ask how large shared plates are and how many the staff suggests for your table.
- Ask about ingredients if you have allergies or avoid certain foods.
- Ask which dishes can be adjusted, since many kitchens can remove a garnish or swap a side dish.

Frequently asked questions

What does market price mean on a menu?

Market price means the dish price changes with the current cost of the ingredient. Ask your server for the price before you order.

What is the difference between a la carte and prix fixe?

A la carte means each dish is priced separately and you pay for what you pick. Prix fixe means a set multi-course meal is sold at one fixed price.

What does seasonal mean on a restaurant menu?

Seasonal means the dish uses ingredients that are currently in season. These dishes change through the year as availability changes.