



The fussy eater

Ariel Leve

It's one thing buying a meal created by a chef - quite another to pay a fortune for some leaves on a plate

Sometimes I just want things to make sense. Why do I have to pay 10 times more for organic items just because they're not sprayed with poison? I expect a lot from my blueberries now. If I'm paying twice as much for something it had better be worth it. I want my belly fat reduced as I eat it and the risk of cardiovascular disease to be diminished by the end of the smoothie.

Which is why I can't bring myself to order bottled water when I eat out. I can't fool myself into thinking it's worth it. I'd love to believe that there's someone who, when deciding on how much to charge for a bottle of water, would announce: "There's no way we can charge that much for that. It's water." Even if it's being served in the most exclusive restaurant in town and they know some idiot will pay it - they'd take a stand. Is it too much to expect there to be a voice of reason?

It is if you live in Notting Hill. Recently I was sitting in a cafe and I ordered some berries. The waitress brought me a tiny bowl of blackberries, raspberries and strawberries. The bowl seemed to contain maybe 10 berries.



I looked at the waitress. "This is it?" I asked. She shrugged and looked embarrassed. "You're charging £10 for this? That's absurd."

"I agree," she said.

"I have to send it back," I said.

"Sorry. It's practically one pound a berry!"

Suddenly I was the cheap one. How did that happen?

Then, looking apologetic, she said, "I know. It's Notting Hill."

At that moment, we were aligned. Two sensible people in a neighbourhood of aliens. I know it's all relative, but if you're paying steep prices for an apartment or designer bag - at least there's something to show for it. The restaurant was blatantly overcharging just because they could

get away with it. There was no value for the money at all. The only way it would have ever been worth the price would be if it had arrived with a round trip ticket to Venice.

It's one thing if you're paying more for a meal that a chef has created. Then there's hopefully some artistry - something innovative. Or at least something that I can't do at home. But the idea that restaurants think they're entitled to charge more by just serving something? There should be some guidelines and pricing regulations. For instance, if you go to the theatre, you pay more money for orchestra seats because they're well placed. The seats in the balcony don't go up in price just because the play gets good reviews.

Here's what I suspect happened in the kitchen. The order came in for a bowl of berries. They open a crate that they purchased - most likely at the nearest supermarket. They scoop a handful of those in a bowl and fill it halfway. Everyone laughs.

A few weeks ago I ordered a salad that was ridiculously overpriced. When the manager asked how it was, I told him: "It's fine. But it could use a tomato." Leaves on a plate. That's all it was. I smiled when I said it. Yet he was taken aback. Why ask if you don't want an honest answer?

His attitude seemed to imply that I should be grateful to have it at all. Then again, it did have a drizzle of olive oil. And I didn't have to wash the dish or carry it to the table. I'm trying to focus on the positive. **OFM** ariel.leve@observer.co.uk

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