

Answering, ‘What’s good?’ is Your Ticket to Paradise

When guests ask, “What’s good?” they’re really saying, “Tell me what to buy.” They’re saying, “Here’s my American Express card... have at it.” This advice-seeking question is your pass to the “Promised Land.” Unfortunately, too many servers respond with, “Everything’s good.” That’s code for, “I don’t have a clue,” or “I’m too lazy to bother.”



1. The launch. Start strong.

Launch into a signature starter, soup, salad, and entrée. “For an appetizer, I recommend our quick-fried calamari served on a bed of marinara. For soup, don’t miss our made-to-order soothing minestrone. For salad, I’d recommend our romaine, radicchio, and arugula salad dressed with a champagne-raspberry vinaigrette. And for the main event, treat yourself to our shell bowl with steamed mussels, steamed clams, and grilled Gulf shrimp.” Remember to shorten or lengthen your launch based on guests’ cues. Either way, this straight out-of-the-gate, no-hesitation approach sends the message that you’re knowledgeable, comfortable, and confident. At the same time, it subliminally suggests ordering a complete meal.

2. The mood question.

Here you ask, “Are you in the mood for seafood, pasta, or beef?” If the guest answers, “seafood,” you say, “We offer a fabulous crab cake platter: two crab cakes made with jumbo lump, lightly bound with mayo, dijon, and Old Bay, and served with fries and mango slaw. Then you backtrack with, “I’d also recommend starting with our lobster potstickers, a cup of our seafood gumbo, and our Caesar salad.” This server-favorite, empathic approach

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says, “I’m tuning in to you,” which is sure to warm up the peanut gallery.

3. The specific question.

My mentor Michael O’Grady taught me that when a guest asks a question, respond with a question. The guest asks, “What do you recommend?” You come back with, “Do you like a New York strip?” If you get a “yes,” jump into a mouth-watering portrait: “Our New York strip is a USDA, 28-day-aged, grain-fed strip grilled to order and served with a 24-hour-labor-of-love merlot demi-glaze. I’d also recommend a Caesar and a side of our truffled mashed potatoes.” If the guest responds “no,” keep asking until you get a “yes,” then proceed accordingly.

4. The testy tease.

Back when I was a waiter, I used this playful taunt: “Ladies and gentlemen, I’d be happy to recommend or describe anything on the menu or wine list for you.” The guest would quip back, “Okay, smarty-pants. Tell me about the braised short ribs and the Argentinian malbec?” At that moment, I had them in the palm of my hands.

5. The attention grabber.

Super server Jahar Glover at Rare Steakhouse in Madison, Wisconsin uses a masterful approach. When his guests inquire about the best dessert, he fires back, “Bananas Foster! That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.” Remember, all great salespeople use hooks to express their powerful positive opinions.

6. The artful comeback.

Avoid the “Everything’s good” turnoff. Twist it with, “Everything’s good, but there are four things I wouldn’t want you to miss.” Now your guest is all ears as you wax on eloquently. In the end, the “What’s good?” question-asking guests are your best friends. They give you the opportunity to take the stage, design a meal, and show your knowledge and expertise — and reap the benefits.

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