

# Descriptive Food Adjectives

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## *Learning To Talk About Food*

We eat regularly. Whether you're a snacker who barely eats anything but small meals throughout the day, or a trucker or charter bus driver who eats big meals to endure the longer drives, or an athlete or a member of the military who eats larger and more specific meals to achieve various physical goals, food is a part of our everyday lives. We then go to eat at a restaurant, take a bite of food ... and the server invariably appears just then to ask "How is everything?" After chewing that bite of food and finally swallowing, do you honestly know how to discuss what you're eating? If you've watched the countless competitions on various food channels you might have an inkling of what to say. But like anything else, it takes practice.

Consider the popular Chicken Pot Pie. There are variations that some might also mention, such as the salmon, lobster, and pork pies popular in New England, the Cornish pasty of Minnesota and the upper peninsula of Michigan, and other local specialty pies. Going with the basic version, a Chicken Pot Pie, be it from a Southern cook, a pie shop in Maine, or a Grandmother in the midwest, has some characteristics which you may expect but haven't actively thought through. The crust can be a light and flaky butter crust such as the ones found in fruit dessert pies. The more common crust is a shortening crust, although lard is once again becoming popular. These crusts are more robust and dense than their flaky, buttery counterpart. In either case the baker needs to protect the edge of the crust to prevent excessive browning or singeing during cooking as this makes the crust edge unpalatable. The sauce in the pie should be rich and thick, creamy and well-seasoned, with a robust chicken flavor. It shouldn't be thin or watery, or be floury or starchy in flavor or texture. The vegetables should be firm and have a good bite to them, being well-seasoned and flavorful, certainly not soggy or bland. There should be ample chicken that's well-seasoned, moist, fork-tender, and has a good bite to it, not soggy, bland or fatty whatsoever. Overall the pie should look appealing, have ample filling to be the robust comfort food the diner expects it to be.

In the above discussion there are certain adjectives used in describing the various parts of the dish:

- Chicken Pot Pie: Appealing, Ample, Robust, Comfort food
- Crust: Light or dense, Flaky or Robust, possibly Buttery, not Browned, Singed or Unpalatable
- Sauce: Rich, Thick, Creamy, Well-seasoned, Robust, not Thin, Watery, Floury or Starchy
- Vegetables: Firm, good Bite, Well-seasoned, Flavorful, not Soggy or Bland
- Chicken: Ample, Well-seasoned, Moist, Fork-tender, good Bite, not Soggy, Bland or Fatty

What diners expect to find in a good Chicken Pot Pie is now condensed into this relatively short list of adjectives, including both pros and cons. This becomes a method for determining if your own pies are acceptable, or if those made by others or served at restaurants you visit are acceptable. What's right or wrong with a given pie can then be discussed and any adjustments can be made. The list can also be used to develop cards for judging Chicken Pot Pies at competitions. Learning to talk about food can be that versatile.

Exercises in this are simple: While you're eating every day, be it after making the food yourself, or at restaurants, cafeterias, or mess halls, think through what you're eating as you're eating it. Are the eggs you ordered for breakfast as you ordered them, maybe over-easy or over-medium, or are they between the two? Is your steak or burger medium-rare as requested? Is it tough, or is it easy to cut? Are your veggies firm with a good bite to them, or are they soggy and limp? Are your mashed potatoes creamy, are they honestly handmade with nice chunks of firm potato mixed in, with good butter and cream in them? Or are they gritty, obviously from instant, and not made correctly or blended well? Every dish, every portion, every snack will give you a different set of parameters to identify. Take notes when you can, especially with dishes and recipes you make yourself. The more often you do this, the easier it will become.

#### *Listing Notes:*

- While this list seems rather complete, it is not intended to be nor will it ever be comprehensive.
- Many food adjectives can show up under multiple categories. For example "burnt", when referring to marshmallows prepared over a fire for a dessert snack when camping is an Appearance, a Taste, a Texture, and a Technique.

#### *Cuisine & Style Descriptors*

Qualifier: "This is a/an \*\*\*\*\* plate/dish/portion/ingredient."

Or: " This plate/dish/portion is \*\*\*\*\*."

#### **Notes:**

- Cuisine & Style Descriptors can be used as both Dining and Menu Item Descriptors.
- This category includes ethnic, regional, and national descriptors such as Asian, British, Caribbean, French, Greek, Jamaican, Filipino, Midwestern, Native, Soul food, Southern, etc., which are far too numerous to list.
- This category also includes dish types and styles such as Casual, Fair food, Fast casual, Fast food, Fine food, Haute cuisine, Pub food, etc.

Authentic

Classic

Clever

Cohesive

Comfort food

Complex

Creative

Distinctive

Elegant

Expressive

Exquisite

Fancy

Festive

Hearty

Homemade

Inauthentic

Indulgent

Inventive

Luscious  
Lush  
Luxury  
Meticulous  
Modern  
Pretentious

Refined  
Robust  
Rustic  
Simple  
Soothing  
Tasteful

Tasteless  
Traditional  
Unrefined  
Untraditional

### *Dining Adjectives*

#### Appearance

Qualifier: "This plate/dish/portion has a/an \*\*\*\*\* appearance."

Ample  
Appealing  
Appetizing  
Bite-sized  
Bland  
Bloody  
Breaded  
Broken  
Briny  
Browned  
Burnt  
Buttered  
Caked  
Candied  
Caramelized  
Char-broiled  
Cheesy  
Chilled  
Clean  
Colorful  
Copious  
Cracked  
Creamy  
Crusted  
Crystalline  
Curdled  
Deep-fried  
Dense  
Dipped  
Dolloped  
Doughy

Dressed  
Dripping  
Drizzled  
Dry  
Encrusted  
Fatty  
Feathery  
Flaky  
Flat  
Fluffy  
Folded  
Fragile  
Fresh  
Fried  
Frosted  
Frozen  
Gelatinous  
Generous  
Glazed  
Golden  
Goopy  
Greasy  
Grilled  
Gritty  
Ground  
Heaping  
Heavy  
Honey-glazed  
Juicy  
Jumbo  
Lacking

Lavish  
Layered  
Lean  
Leathery  
Lightly-breaded  
Limp  
Lip-smacking  
Mashed  
Meaty  
Medium  
Medium-rare  
Medium-well  
Messy  
Meticulous  
Milky  
Minced  
Moist  
Mouth-watering  
Mushy  
Oily  
Pan-fried  
Peppery  
Petite  
Pillowy  
Pinwheel  
Plain  
Pleasant  
Plump  
Poached  
Poorly-crafted  
Poorly-executed

Pounded  
Prickly  
Pulpy  
Rare  
Raw  
Risen  
Roasted  
Runny  
Salty  
Satiny  
Sauced  
Saucy  
Sautéed  
Seared  
Seasoned  
Separated  
Scalded  
Scorched

Silky  
Singed  
Sizzling  
Sliced  
Slimy  
Smooth  
Smothered  
Soggy  
Spiraled  
Split  
Spongy  
Sprinkled  
Stacked  
Steamed  
Stinging  
Stringy  
Stuffed  
Sugary

Syrupy  
Thick  
Thickened  
Thin  
Toasted  
Topped  
Tossed  
Translucent  
Unappealing  
Uncooked  
Velvety  
Watery  
Waxy  
Well-crafted  
Well-done  
Well-executed  
Whipped  
Woody

## Smells

Qualifier: "This plate/dish/portion/ingredient has a/an \*\*\*\*\* odor."

Or: "This plate/dish/portion/ingredient smells \*\*\*\*\*."

Acrid  
Appealing  
Aromatic  
Bright  
Buttery  
Caustic  
Chocolaty  
Cheesy  
Deep-fried  
Fermented  
Fetid  
Fishy  
Floral  
Foul  
Fresh  
Fried  
Fruity  
Gamy

Garlicky  
Gingery  
Greasy  
Grilled  
Herbal  
Harsh  
Lemony  
Minty  
Musty  
Nutty  
Noxious  
Off-putting  
Onion-y  
Over-powering  
Pan-fried  
Peppery  
Pickled  
Piquant

Pungent  
Rancid  
Rank  
Reeking  
Robust  
Rotten  
Smelly  
Smokey  
Sour  
Spiced  
Spicy  
Strong  
Unappealing  
Vinegary  
Weak  
Yeasty  
Zesty  
Zingy

## Tastes

Qualifier: "This plate/dish/portion/ingredient has a/an \*\*\*\*\* taste."

Or: "This plate/dish/portion/ingredient tastes \*\*\*\*\*."

Or: "This plate/dish/portion has a good \*\*\*\*\* to it."

**Note:** The five basic tastes are Bitter, Salty, Sour, Sweet, and Umami.

Acerbic	Delightful	Intense
Acidic	Delicious	Iron-y
Acrid	Distinctive	Lacking
Addictive	Dominant	Lavish
Aftertaste	Elegant	Lemony
Appealing	Fancy	Lean
Astringent	Fermented	Lightly-salted
Balanced	Fiery (spice)	Lip-smacking
Biting	Fishy	Lively
Bitter	Flavorful	Marinated
Bland	Flavorless	Meaty
Blended	Flavorsome	Mellow
Bloody	Floral	Mild
Bold	Floury	Milky
Brackish	Flowery	Minerally
Bright	Fresh	Minty
Briny	Fruity	Moist
Burnt	Full-bodied	Nectarous
Burst of flavor(s)	Gamy	Nicely-seasoned
Buttery	Garlicky	Nutty
Candied	Gingery	Onion-y
Caramelized	Greasy	Off-putting
Cardboard	Grilled	Overpowering
Char-broiled	Harsh	Over-seasoned
Charred	Heady	Peppery
Cheesy	Heat (spice)	Perfectly-seasoned
Chilled	Herbal	Pickled
Chocolaty	Homemade	Plain
Citrusy	Honey-glazed	Pleasant
Clean	Hot (spice)	Raw
Complex	Imbalanced	Refreshing
Complexity	Incorporated	Rich
Contrast	Indulgent	Ripe
Decadent	Infused	Robust
Delectable	Inspid	Salty

Sapid	Stinging	Under-seasoned
Savory	Strong	Uneven
Seasoned	Sugary	Unflavored
Scalded	Sweet	Unpalatable
Scorched	Sweetness	Unripe
Sharp	Sweet-and-sour	Unsavory
Simple	Syrupy	Unseasoned
Simplicity	Tangy	Vinegary
Singed	Tantalizing	Well-seasoned
Smokey	Tart	Weak
Smokiness	Tasteful	Well-crafted
Sour	Tasteless	Yeasty
Spiced	Tasty	Zesty
Spicy	Treacly	Zingy
Starchy	Umami	
Steamy	Unappealing	

### Temperatures

Qualifier: "This plate/dish/portion (was prepared)/is \*\*\*\*\*."

Or: "This plate/dish/portion has a good \*\*\*\*\* to it."

Caustic	Icy	Raw
Cold	Lukewarm	Tepid
Contrast	Medium	Uncooked
Cool	Medium-rare	Uneven
Fiery (temperature)	Medium-well	Warm
Hot (temperature)	Piping hot	Well-done
Ice-cold	Rare	

### Textures

Qualifier: "This plate/dish/portion feels/is \*\*\*\*\*."

Or: "This plate/dish/portion has a good \*\*\*\*\* to it."

Addictive	Broken	Charred
Airy	Burnt	Cheesy
Al dente	Bubbly	Chunky
Appealing	Caked	Clammy
Balanced	Candied	Clotted
Bark	Caramelized	Contrast
Bite	Cardboard	Creamy
Breaded	Caustic	Crumbly
Brittle	Char	Crunchiness

Crunchy  
Crusty  
Curdled  
Dense  
Doughy  
Dripping  
Dried  
Dry  
Elastic  
Encrusted  
Fall-off-the-bone tender  
Fancy  
Fatty  
Feather-light  
Feathery  
Fermented  
Fibrous  
Firm  
Fishy  
Fizzy  
Flaky  
Flat  
Fleshy  
Floury  
Fluffy  
Fork-tender  
Fresh  
Fried  
Frosty  
Frozen  
Fuzzy  
Gamy  
Gelatinous  
Goosey  
Greasy  
Grilled  
Gritty  
Heady  
Hearty  
Heavy  
Imbalanced  
Indulgent

Jaw-breaking  
Juicy  
Lacking  
Lavish  
Layered  
Lean  
Leathery  
Light  
Lightly-breaded  
Limp  
Luscious  
Lush  
Mashed  
Meaty  
Minced  
Moist  
Mouth-feel  
Mushy  
Nectarous  
Off-putting  
Oily  
Pan-fried  
Papery  
Pillowy  
Plain  
Pleasant  
Plump  
Pounded  
Prickly  
Puffy  
Pulpy  
Puréed  
Raw  
Risen  
Roasted  
Robust  
Rubbery  
Runny  
Sandy  
Satiny  
Sauced  
Saucy

Scalded  
Sear  
Separated  
Shaved  
Silky  
Simplicity  
Singed  
Sliced  
Slimy  
Smooth  
Smothered  
Snap  
Soggy  
Spongy  
Starchy  
Steamed  
Sticky  
Stringy  
Succulent  
Sugary  
Syrupy  
Tacky  
Tender  
Thick  
Thickened  
Thin  
Toasted  
Toothiness  
Toothsome  
Tough  
Unappealing  
Uneven  
Unpalatable  
Velvety  
Watery  
Waxy  
Well-crafted  
Whipped  
Woody  
Yeasty

## *Menu Item Adjectives*

### Writing Menu Item Descriptions

In menu descriptions the Chicken Pot Pie can be described in manners similar to those discussed earlier. But in menu descriptions there are rules that have to be followed:

- Simple: Ensure any diner can understand the menu description without much further explanation by the server.
- Accurate: Preparation methods, personnel quality certifications, and other descriptors have to match how the dish is made.
- Truthful: Point-of-origin or source, ingredient certifications, and related information cannot cause a "bait and switch" situation.

Menu descriptions for the previously-discussed Chicken Pot Pie might read as follows:

1. "Chicken Pot Pie, a great comfort food."
  - This can be baked and served from whole, frozen pies without possible issues.
2. "Handmade, just like Grandma used to make! Rich and creamy, with large chunks of chicken, lots of veggies, and a golden, flaky crust."
  - The pie crusts, chicken and vegetables might be from frozen and the sauce might be from a can, as that's how Grandma might have made it. But the pie has to be assembled and baked in the restaurant's kitchen or in a supplying commissary.
3. "Our handmade pie, made with fresh hand-cut vegetables and whole chicken, and a thick flavorful sauce in a golden-brown crust."
  - Only the vegetables have to be fresh, the rest can be as in the first example, including the chicken being from frozen.
4. "Handmade pie, made with tender, slow-roasted free-range local chicken, with organic vegetables cooked to perfection, a rich and creamy sauce made from whole local milk delivered daily, and our own robust and flavorful lard crust. Our most popular comfort food! Topped with a slice of our fresh, handmade mozzarella and additional sauce on request."
  - All of this has to be absolutely true for each and every pie. If, for example, local chicken isn't available for some pies, or anything else in the description cannot be fulfilled, it's better to 86 the pie off the menu until the described ingredient is once-again available than it is to possibly become embroiled in claims or court judgements of false advertising.



You can create your own exercises in writing menu item descriptions by simply writing them. It doesn't matter if you write descriptions for your own dishes, or if you write new ones for dishes you've ordered when you dine out. While eating the dish, think through how you would describe it given your own experience with it. How would you make the dish sound most desirable to a diner who only has the information on the page? What's truthful and honest about the dish (of course, without being negative), and how might it benefit from a certified ingredient type that would nudge the diner to order it? Creativity counts, but authenticity, truthfulness, and honesty matter.

## Techniques

Aged	Encrusted	Poached
Baked	Fermented	Pounded
Barbecued	Flash-fried	Preserved
Battered	Folded	Puffed
Beaten	Free-range	Puréed
Bind	Fried	Rare
Blackened	Fresh	Raw
Blanched	Fresh-ground	Rendered
Blended	Fresh-squeezed	Risen
Boiled	Frosted	Roasted
Braised	Frozen	Sauced
Browned	Glazed	Saucy
Burnt	Golden	Sautéed
Buttered	Grilled	Scrambled
Candied	Ground	Seared
Caramelized	Hand-cut	Seasoned
Char-broiled	Hand-trimmed	Scalded
Chilled	Heaped	Scorched
Chunked	Iced	Shaved
Clotted	Infused	Simmered
Cooled	Julienned	Sizzling
Cracked	Layered	Skewered
Creamed	Marinated	Sliced
Crumbled	Mashed	Slow-cooked
Cured	Meaty	Slow-roasted
Deep-fried	Medium	Smooth
Dipped	Medium-rare	Smothered
Dolloped	Medium-well	Spiraled
Dredged	Minced	Split
Dressed	Pan-fried	Sprinkled
Drizzled	Pickled	Squeezed
Earthy	Pinwheel	Stacked

Stale  
Steamed  
Stir-fried  
Stuffed  
Tenderized  
Thickened  
Toasted  
Topped  
Tossed  
Trimmed  
Translucent  
Well-done  
Whipped

## Certifications

### Notes:

- Using the following terms on a menu may require certification as per local, state, or federal law, or by industry or religious organizations. Be sure to check all necessary laws for compliance for these and other terms which are not listed.
- There are more than 100 certification programs for beef, veal, pork, lamb, and other proteins. Ensure you are in compliance prior to using one of the available labels.
- Some of these terms are covered on the "Topic-Specific Labeling Information" page on the FDA's web site.
- Consult the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service web site for more complete guidance on terminology usage.
- Consult "The Seafood List" on the FDA's web site for Acceptable Market Names for fish & seafood.

Antibiotic-free

Center-cut

Corn-fed

Dry aged

Farm raised

Fat free

Flown in daily

Free range

Fresh

Genuine

Gluten free

Grass-fed

Halal

Heart healthy

Hormone free

Imported

Kosher

Low fat

Low sodium

Made from scratch

Natural

Nutritious

Non-fat

Non-GMO

Organic

Pure

Reduced fat

Reduced sodium

Sugar free

Trim

USDA Choice

USDA Grade A

USDA Prime

USDA Select

Vegan

Vegetarian

Wet aged

Whole grains

Wild caught