

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 one of the variations from a Southern cook, a pie shop in Maine, or a Grandmother in the midwest, these versions have some common characteristics which you may expect to experience 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 though is a shortening crust, although lard is once again becoming popular. These latter 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 Brownd, 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, regardless of the regional or local variation, 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
Folksy
Hearty
Heritage
Historical
Homemade
Hometown
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
Goey
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	Sautéed	Stringy
Pillowry	Seared	Stuffed
Pinwheel	Seasoned	Sugary
Plain	Separated	Syrupy
Pleasant	Scalded	Thick
Plump	Scorched	Thickened
Poached	Silky	Thin
Poorly-crafted	Singed	Toasted
Poorly-executed	Sizzling	Topped
Pounded	Sliced	Tossed
Prickly	Slimy	Translucent
Pulpy	Smooth	Unappealing
Rare	Smothered	Uncooked
Raw	Soggy	Velvety
Risen	Spiraled	Watery
Roasted	Split	Waxy
Runny	Spongy	Well-crafted
Salty	Sprinkled	Well-done
Satiny	Stacked	Well-executed
Sauced	Steamed	Whipped
Saucy	Stinging	Woody

Smells

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

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

Acrid	Foul	Off-putting
Agreeable	Fresh	Onion-y
Appealing	Fried	Over-powering
Aromatic	Fruity	Pan-fried
Bright	Gamy	Peppery
Buttery	Garlicky	Pickled
Caustic	Gingery	Piquant
Chocolaty	Greasy	Pungent
Cheesy	Grilled	Rancid
Deep-fried	Herbal	Rank
Disagreeable	Harsh	Reeking
Fermented	Lemony	Robust
Fetid	Minty	Rotten
Fishy	Musty	Smelly
Floral	Nutty	Smokey
Flowery	Noxious	Sour

Spiced	Unappealing	Yeasty
Spicy	Vinegary	Zesty
Strong	Weak	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."

Or: "This plate/dish/portion has a good ***** on the front/back side."

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

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

Over-seasoned	Simplicity	Tasteful
Peppery	Singed	Tasteless
Perfectly-seasoned	Smokey	Tasty
Pickled	Smokiness	Treacly
Plain	Sour	Umami
Pleasant	Spiced	Unappealing
Pop	Spicy	Under-seasoned
Raw	Starchy	Uneven
Refreshing	Steamy	Unflavored
Rich	Stinging	Unpalatable
Ripe	Strong	Unripe
Robust	Sugary	Unsavory
Salty	Sugary-sweet	Unseasoned
Sapid	Sweet	Vinegary
Savory	Sweetness	Well-seasoned
Seasoned	Sweet-and-sour	Weak
Scalded	Syrupy	Well-crafted
Scorched	Tangy	Yeasty
Sharp	Tantalizing	Zesty
Simple	Tart	Zingy

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	Bark	Burnt
Airy	Bite	Bubbly
Al dente	Breaded	Caked
Appealing	Brittle	Candied
Balanced	Broken	Caramelized

Cardboard
Caustic
Char
Charred
Cheesy
Chunky
Clammy
Clotted
Contrast
Creamy
Crumbly
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
Goey
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