

There's something fishy about menu's SQ



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Is a restaurant obliged to tell a guest that the six tiger prawns he's ordering are going to cost him R900, or does "SQ" on the menu put the onus on the guest to ask?

Have you ever wondered what the term SQ means?

We see it so often next to items on restaurant menus, usually seafood, and most of us take it to mean that if we really need to know how much the crayfish thermidor costs before we order it, we'll have to ask.

Definitive answers aren't easy to come by - try Googling "sq, menu, restaurant" and you'll see what I mean.

'By law restaurants are required to tell people what menu items cost when they order them'

Ask a regular restaurant-goer and answers will range from "subject to quality" to "subject to quotation" and "seasonal quotation".

One media website blogger insists it was originally the French "salon qualitaire", because eating houses used to judge the quality of the item served, and therefore the price.

With food items such as shellfish fluctuating radically in price, restaurants are loathe to commit the price to their menus.

While the concept is not uniquely South African, the use of the letters 'SQ' appears to be limited to our restaurants. In some US restaurants, for example, you'll find the term 'market price' next to expensive seafood items.

So when two visitors from Cyprus went to the swish, African-themed steakhouse Tribes in Emperors Palace, the "SQ" next to the giant tiger prawns in place of a price didn't mean a thing to them.

One ordered six, didn't question the price, and certainly wasn't given any sort of "quotation".

Which is why he did a double-take when the bill came. They'd cost him R900 - R150 each.

When his friend Dino Fotiadis, of Bruma, heard about the incident, he was outraged and returned to the restaurant the following evening with his two friends, to find out why the price of the prawns weren't disclosed, given the huge cost involved.

"I asked the duty manager how much one tiger prawn costs. He said R110. But the waitress who had served my friends the previous evening was standing nearby and she quickly corrected him, saying they cost R150 each.

"The manager went on to say that it was normal practice not to advise guests of the cost of the SQ items on the menu, unless expressly asked."

"So I would like to warn consumers of the dangers of asking what that SQ cost is, before ordering," Fotiadis said.

Asked to comment, Tribes co-owner Cathy Deseterous confirmed that the restaurant's policy was not to volunteer the cost of SQ items to diners when they ordered them.

"There's a good reason for this. Our clientele is mainly businessmen, often entertaining clients, and we once had a very ugly incident when a man took exception to being told what an SQ item cost. He was furious, saying: 'Do you think I can't afford it?'

"That's when we decided on our policy of only disclosing the price if people ask. Most people do ask."

As for the price of the "tiger giants", Deseterous said, they're "not a cheap item", and the restaurant did not put a big mark-up on them.

"They are huge prawns - two would be enough for most people," she said.

The diner in question had seen the prawns prior to ordering, she said.

"But I don't want someone to feel ripped off, so I'm going to contact the person, explain our policy and try to make amends," she said.

I asked the manager of a popular national seafood restaurant chain how his staffers were trained to deal with the SQ issue.

"If it's crayfish or prawns, we charge per kilo, weigh the number they request and then show them the price," he said.

Some people did get offended, interpreting this as a judgment about their financial status, he said, "but we still prefer to be upfront about the price". In that chain, giant tiger prawns cost from R100 each, depending on size.

"So R900 for six is not outrageous," he said.

Intrigued by the SQ issue, I went in search of expert opinion.

Wendy Alberts of the Restaurant Association of South Africa gave a swift, emphatic answer.

"By law restaurants are required to tell people what menu items cost when they order them," she said.

But there's clearly a lack of understanding around this, and a feeling that restaurants are somehow exempt from the legal obligation other retailers have to make the price of goods known to consumers.

Quoted in the trade magazine *Hotel & Restaurant*, in an article on restaurant prices, Neil Markovitz of Fedhasa (the Federated Hospitality Association of South Africa) in the Western Cape, said the onus should be on the consumer to ask the price for items that are marked SQ, "to prevent any nasty surprises when they receive the bill".

Fedhasa's legislative consultant, Peter Cumberlege, said he wasn't aware of any law compelling restaurants to publish their prices.

He thought that SQ was probably used more to avoid frightening away the guests, than because of volatile prices.

Revealing the price of goods for sale is clearly in consumers' best interests.

It's embarrassing to have to ask "how much do the prawns cost?".

There's simply no justification for forcing consumers to go through this, in the smug assumption that "if they have to ask, they can't afford it".

Restaurants could simply insert a typed sheet into the printed menu, listing those shellfish dishes and their current prices.

The same goes for the daily specials.

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