

FOOD & DRINK

Off-Menu Items: The Worst Kept Secret in Food

It's no secret that "secret menus" are the worst kept of all secrets. You've probably been through In-N-Out's drive-thru and ordered your fries Animal Style—that is, with cheese, grilled onions, and secret sauce on top—or maybe gone hog on an Apple Pie McFlurry (or you could always try [Blankets in a Blankets](#)), which is exactly what it sounds like. The question these days is a less, *What can I get?* and slightly more, *How did I come to be able to get it in the first place?*

It's a good one. First, you have to get straight what actually constitutes a secret menu item—and the answer depends on whom you ask, actually. On one hand, there's the restaurant that sanctions the off-menu item, and has built a reputation on it. In-N-Out, for instance, wears their off-menu item badge proudly, posting their "[Not-So-Secret Menu](#)" on a page right on their site.

But secret menus aren't only limited to fast food; Daniel Holzman, chef and owner of renowned New York City restaurant [The Meatball Shop](#), is among the fold that's been known to offer off-menu items. His latest is mini-buffalo chicken meatballs, which became such an organic cult favorite among clientele that it landed a permanent spot on TMS's lineup. These dishes are possibly discontinued items that you can still ask for; new offerings he's piloting; or, sometimes, he says, chefs are just trying to broaden their offerings, albeit quietly.

"A lot of times a buddy of mine who is a chef will say, *You've got to have available a burger for anyone who wants a burger, even if it's not on the menu.* So, you can go get a burger at [a] restaurant if you know about it." An off-menu offering is born. You just have to ask—and know to ask in the first place.

Whether other larger, more commercial chain restaurants sanction secret menus is stickier. Chipotle, for instance, is quick to deny the existence of authorized off-menu items. "While our crews are taught to accommodate customers' requests within reason using the ingredients we have on our line, we don't have a secret menu," a Chipotle public relations and communications manager wrote to me in an email. If you actually head to Chipotle and ask for the famed off-menu Quesarito (a burrito wrapped in a quesadilla, God rest your arteries), however, you *will* get it, although some stores will yank you off to the side, out of line, while your creation is assembled: greatness with a side of shame.

For places like these, secret menu items are a combination of tweaks of what's generally already available — but subtracting lettuce from your burger does not a secret menu item make. Specific, generally more involved [combinations](#) have come to be recognized by a community of customers, spread by both word-of-mouth and the Internet, mostly, Holzman says. "Some of it comes from the customers who demand things that haven't been put on the menu, or that a chef didn't put something on the menu to [test] how it might work."

A spokesperson from Starbucks, too, maintains that the coffee chain doesn't have a secret menu, but rather that customers are "encouraged to customize" what adds up to 170,000 drinks all told (36,000 Frappuccinos alone). But some combos seem to have stuck and been named by customers: for instance, a Mocha Frappuccino with Java Chips and peppermint syrup will get you a what's been dubbed a "Grasshopper." (Even Starbucks's rep knew the drink when referenced on a phone call.) Two former Starbucks employees, one who worked in Washington, D.C., and another in Long Island, N.Y., said that recipes for off-menu items aren't taught, but staffers who've been there for a while tend to learn from customer requests and then pass them through the ranks.

So, should you walk into the next party you go to and start rattling off your Rolodex of secret menu items to impress? Not exactly, no, despite how well "KFC Poutine" rolls off the tongue. Besides, Holzman says, secret menus shouldn't be about elitism, anyway — they should actually be inclusionary, and come from a genuine place. "It's really nice to be able to invite customers into our restaurant to eat and not exclude them.... It's also about giving something special to your regular customers who are in the know, so it's kind of cool for them."

Still, you might want to keep the knowledge in your back pocket — or at least bookmarked on your phone — for the next time you're on a road trip, stranded in a fresh food desert. A menu hack just might make the next seven hours next to your highly un-showered friend slightly more fun.