

THE HAGGLER

DAVID SEGAL

An Unexpected Plate of Chutzpah May Be Served After Dessert

MARKET price. Are there two more ominous words on any restaurant menu? The Haggler thinks not. It's a phrase with plenty of if-you-have-to-ask hauteur, but those too cowed to inquire may be in for a grim surprise.

"They said 'market price,'" gasps a character on "Community," the NBC comedy, as he weeps over a stupefyingly high restaurant bill. Then, shrieking toward the kitchen: "What market are you shopping at?"

That said, at least "market price" carries with it a bit of a heads-up. You know what would be a whole lot worse? This:

Q. On Oct. 30, two friends and I went to lunch at Nello, a restaurant on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Shortly after we were seated, a waiter came to the table and mentioned the day's specials, one of which was described as pasta with truffle sauce.

At the end of the meal, I got a look at the check and for a moment I thought I was hallucinating. The meal for the three of us cost \$400. How was that possible?

Easy.

The pasta dish cost \$275.

No joke.

When I confronted the headwaiter, I was told that Nello never discloses the prices of specials and that it is the customer's duty to pipe up with questions. To add obnoxiousness to injury, the manager told me that we should expect high prices at Nello because 1) the restaurant is near Hermès, the French sell-

E-mail: haggler@nytimes.com. Keep it brief and family-friendly, and go easy on the caps-lock key. Letters may be edited for clarity and length.

er of luxury clothing and bags, and 2) the restaurant has been in its current location for nearly 25 years.

Weirdly enough, I still felt ripped off. Only after I began to make a fuss did a manager refund 25 percent of our bill.

I later e-mailed Nello Balan, the owner, and within a day, he wrote back to apologize for our terrible experience. That was months ago, obviously, and if Mr. Balan had a refund of some kind in mind, there is no evidence of it.

Can you work some Haggler magic and get my money back? **CRAIG TALL**
Mercer Island, Wash.

A. Bill shock is common in the realm of cellphones, hospitals and auto body shops. It is rare in restaurants, but it is apparently a recurring phenomenon at Nello, which is both a longtime haunt for certain celebrities and a Venus' flytrap for tourist dollars.

An Internet search reveals that more than a few people have visited this Euro-vibed establishment on Madison Avenue and come down with a bad case of the \$275 truffle blues.

"The price of \$275 was not mentioned by a single word," groaned a truffle-ruffled customer on TripAdvisor. "We were floored when we got the bill," wailed a diner on Urbanspoon. Under the heading "The surprise of my life," a patron who posted on menupages.com wrote: "Well, the bill came and we were horrified — just under \$400 for two people with no alcohol."

One e-complainer said the waiter would not come near the table after dropping off the check — which included a 20 percent tip for service. That might be a pretty succinct definition of "chutzpah." A bit of background: Nello



CHRISTOPH HITZ

Balan is one of the more — what is a nice way to put this? — colorful characters in Manhattan's dining business. A native of Romania with an exotic accent, he says he is a descendent of Vlad

the Impaler, the inspiration for Count Dracula. He has bleached blond hair, the body of a bouncer and a strange gift for regularly turning up in the news media.

For a few years, that gift might have had something to do with money. In 2007, Richard Johnson, then the Page Six gossip columnist for The New York Post, apologized in print for accepting a \$1,000 "gift" from Mr. Balan. Some cynics wondered at the time if this largess explained the many favorable mentions of the restaurant in the column.

Oh, and there was a lawsuit in 2009, brought by former waiters who said that Mr. Balan had "diverted" more than \$100,000 a year from their tips. A lawyer for the employees e-mailed the Haggler to say "the case was resolved" but did not elaborate.

Last week, the Haggler called the restaurant, and a manager asked that any questions be sent by e-mail. No problem. An hour later, Mr. Balan wrote back.

"Thank you for addressing the problem directly to me," the e-mail began. He went on to caution against accepting Mr. Tall's version of his conversation with Nello's staff, because one person's account could easily be distorted. But he quickly added that the waiter might have been "confrontational" and that the restaurant required servers to disclose the price of specials.

"I will clarify my policy, which is in place since we opened," he wrote.

Maybe a neon sign would be a good idea, because it sure seems that a lot of those waiters are falling down on this particular job. But this entire issue, it seems, was new to Mr. Balan, who contended that the first time he had heard about the \$275 truffle special was when he received Mr. Tall's complaint.

"Since I value every customer," he wrote, "I will offer another 25 percent discount on that check and I hope to see him back soon."

Mr. Balan closed with yet another offer, this one for the Haggler. "If you have time join me for a white truffle lunch, I still have two pounds left before the season of the winter truffles kicks in."

You hear that, America?

Nello has two pounds of truffles left. You've been warned. □