

Restaurant Menu

Economics of Menu Production

As early as the mid-20th century, some restaurants have relied on “Menu Specialists” to design and print their menus. Prior to the emergence of digital printing, these niche printing companies printed full-color menus on offset presses. The economics of full-color offset made it impractical to print short press runs. The solution was to print a “menu shell” with everything but the prices. The prices would later be printed on a less costly black-only press. In a typical order, the printer might produce 600 menu shells, then finish and laminate 150 menus with prices. When the restaurant needed to reorder, the printer would add prices and laminate some of the remaining shells.

With the advent of digital presses, it became practical in the 1990s to print full-color menus affordably in short press runs, sometimes as few as 25 menus. Because of limits on sheet size, larger laminated menus were impractical for single-location independent restaurants to produce press runs of as few as 300 menus, but some restaurants may want to place far fewer menus into service. Some menu printers continue to use shells. The disadvantage for the restaurant is that it is unable to update anything but prices without creating a new shell.

During the economic crisis in the 1970s, many restaurants found it costly to reprint the menu as inflation caused prices to increase. Economists noted this, and it has become part of economic theory, under the term “Menu Costs”. In general, such “menu costs” may be incurred by a range of businesses, not just restaurants; for example, during a period of inflation, any company that prints catalogs or product price lists will have to reprint these items with new price figures.

To avoid having to reprint the menus throughout the year as prices changed, some restaurants began to display their menus on chalkboards, with the menu items and prices written in chalk. This way, the restaurant could easily modify the prices without going to the expense of reprinting the paper menus. A similar tactic continued to be used in the 2000s with certain items that are sensitive to changing supply, fuel costs, and so on: the use of the term “market price” or “Please ask the server” instead of stating the price. This allows restaurants to modify the price of lobster, fresh fish and other foods subject to rapid changes in cost.

The latest trend in menus is to display them on handheld tablets; customers can browse through these and look at the photographs of the dishes.

Types of Menu

Paper Menu

Menus vary in length and detail depending on the type of restaurant. The simplest hand-held menus are printed on a single sheet of paper, though menus with multiple pages or “views” are common. In some cafeteria-style restaurants and chain restaurants, a single-page menu may double as a disposable placemat. To protect a menu from spills and wear, it may be protected by heat-sealed vinyl page protectors, lamination or menu covers. Restaurants consider their positioning in the marketplace (e.g. fine dining, fast food, informal) in deciding which style of menu to use.

Some restaurants use a single menu as the sole source of information about the food for customers, but in other cases, the main menu is supplemented by ancillary menus, such as:

- An appetizer menu (nachos, chips and salsa, vegetables and dip, oysters, wings, etc.)
- A holiday special menu
- A wine list
- A liquor and mixed drinks menu
- A beer list
- A dessert menu (which may also include a list of tea and coffee options)

Some restaurants use only text in their menus. In other cases, restaurants include illustrations and photos, either of the dishes or of an element of the culture which is associated with the restaurant. For instance a Lebanese kebab restaurant might decorate its menu with photos of Lebanese mountains and beaches. Particularly with the ancillary menu types, the menu may be provided in alternative formats, because these menus (other than wine lists) tend to be much shorter than food menus. For example, an appetizer menu or a dessert menu may be displayed on a folded paper table tent, a hard plastic table stand, a flipchart style wooden “table stand”, or even, in the case of a pizza restaurant with a limited wine selection, a wine list glued to an empty bottle.

Take-out restaurants often leave paper menus in the lobbies and doorsteps of nearby homes as advertisements. The first to do so may have been New York City's Empire Szechuan chain, founded in 1976.^[9] The chain and other restaurants' aggressive menu distribution in the Upper West Side of Manhattan caused the "Menu Wars" of the 1990s, including invasions of Empire Szechuan by the "Menu Vigilantes", the revoking of its cafe license, several lawsuits, and physical attacks on menu distributors.

Menu Board

Some restaurants - typically fast-food restaurants and cafeteria-style establishments - provide their menu in a large poster or display board format up high on the wall or above the service counter. This way, all of the patrons can see all of the choices, and the restaurant does not have to provide printed menus. This large format menu may also be set up outside (see the next section). The simplest large format menu boards have the menu printed or painted on a large flat board. More expensive large format menu boards include boards that have a metal housing, a translucent surface, and a backlight (which facilitates the reading of the menu in low light) and boards that have removable numbers for the prices. This enables the restaurant to change prices without having to have the board reprinted or repainted.

Some restaurants such as cafes and small eateries use a large chalkboard to display the entire menu. The advantage of using a chalkboard is that the menu items and prices can be changed; the downside is that the chalk may be hard to read in lower light or glare, and the restaurant has to have a staff member who has attractive, clear handwriting. In addition to chalk, some restaurants prefer to use Wet-Erase or Dry-Erase Markers instead.

A high-tech successor to the chalkboard menu is the 'Write-On Wipe Off Illuminated Sign, using LED technology. The text appears in a vibrant color against a black background.

Outdoor

Some restaurants provide a copy of their menu outside the restaurant. Fast-food restaurants that have a drive-through or walk-up window will often put the entire menu on a board, lit-up sign, or poster outside so that patrons can select their meal choices. High-end restaurants may also provide a copy of their menu outside the restaurant, with the pages of the menu placed in a lit-up glass display case; this way, prospective patrons can see if the menu choices are to their liking. Also, some mid-level and high-end restaurants may provide a partial indication of their menu listings-the "specials"-on a chalkboard displayed outside the restaurant. The chalkboard will typically provide a list of seasonal items or dishes that are the specialty of the chef which is only available for a few days.

Digital Displays

With the invention of LCD and Plasma displays, some menus have moved from a static printed model to one which can change dynamically. By using a flat LCD screen and a computer server, menus can be digitally displayed allowing moving images, animated effects and the ability to edit details and prices. Due to the digital panel cost reduction, OLED, QLED, MiniLED technologies are also becoming popular.

For fast food restaurants, a benefit is the ability to update prices and menu items as frequently as needed, across an entire chain. Digital menu boards also allow restaurant owners to control the day parting of their menus, converting from a breakfast menu in the late morning. Some platforms support the ability allow local operators to control their own pricing while the design aesthetic is controlled by the corporate entity. Various software tools and hardware developments have been created for the specific purpose of managing a digital menu board system. Digital menu screens can also alternate between displaying the full menu and showing video commercials to promote specific dishes or menu items.

Besides, Touch Screen Displays, Interactive Displays, Multi-Lingual Displays are all being installed.

Online Menu

Websites featuring online restaurant menus have been on the Internet for nearly a decade. In recent years, however, more and more restaurants outside of large metropolitan areas have been able to feature their menus online as a result of this trend.

Several restaurant-owned and startup online food ordering websites already included menus on their websites, yet due to the limitations of which restaurants could handle online orders, many restaurants were left invisible to the Internet aside from an address listing. Multiple companies came up with the idea of posting menus online simultaneously, and it is difficult to ascertain who was first. Menus and online food ordering have been available online since at least 1997. Since 1997, hundreds of online restaurant menu web sites have appeared on the Internet. Some sites are city-specific, some list by region, state or province.

Due to the pandemic situation started in 2020, online menu, online ordering, and food delivery became more and more popular.

Secret Menu

Another phenomenon is the so-called "secret menu" where some fast food restaurants are known for having unofficial and unadvertised selections that customers learn by word of mouth, or by looking them up online. Fast food restaurants will often prepare variations on items already available, but to have them all on the menu would create clutter. Chipotle Mexican Grill is well known for having a simple five-item menu, but they also offer quesadillas and single tacos, despite neither being on the menu board.

In-N-Out Burger has a very simple menu of burgers, fries, sodas, and shakes, but has a wide variety of "secret" styles of preparations, the most famous being "Animal Style" burgers and fries. This can also occur in high-end restaurants, which may be willing to prepare certain items which are not listed on the menu (e.g. dishes that have long been favorites of regular clientele). Sometimes restaurants may name foods often ordered by regular clientele after them, for either convenience or prestige. At some fast food restaurants 'secret menu' items exist which were once part of the regular menu but are no longer advertised, such as the chili cheese burrito at Taco Bell. These items may still be rung up as a regular menu item, and are assembled from ingredients that are still in use in other menu items.

Other Menus

Menu Design & Presentation can be creative, what about using:

- Digital Table Display
- Robotic
- Image Projection
- VR and AR



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>>Menu Covers