

Seven steps to a better menu

By Megan Rowe

Delicious food, great service and a comfortable, clean interior all loom large in a restaurant's chances of success, but often that formula leaves out one essential ingredient: the right menu balance. Here's what the process involves.

1. Know your true costs.

Many owners know their food cost percentages but overlook the fact that food doesn't prepare itself. Operators should aim to replace any current underperforming menu item with something that will improve the gross margin per plate.

2. Consider that less may be more.

For a variety of reasons, briefer menus make a lot of sense. The days of hulking menus, meant to appeal to a mass audience, seem to be numbered. Many of the major chains are trimming their menus.

3. Look at the big picture.

"The worst mistake people make is cooking what they love and not thinking about the waste," says Arlene Spiegel, a foodservice consultant based in New York City. She advises assigning menu components to one of three buckets: one-third signature items (dishes that define the restaurant and aren't available everywhere); one-third familiar, accessible choices that will satisfy the most finicky eaters; and the remaining one-third items created from by-products of the first two groups.

"That way, nothing gets thrown in the garbage, nothing goes to waste and your chances of achieving margins and profit are much higher," Spiegel explains. By "nothing," of course, Spiegel means "less," but if you or your staff really need a wake-up call she is a big fan of examining trash, not only what's left on customers' plates at the end of the meal but all the

food thrown away during prep. She has clients collect all waste food products into buckets or clear liners, then weighs them at the end of a shift. "Sometimes there is 18 to 20 pounds of food that you have paid for that's going into the garbage. Before you've started you're already behind the eight ball," she observes.

4. Consider productivity and efficiency.

The kitchen gear and capacity and the menu need to balance out, or you can wind up with overused pieces that create a back-of-the-house bottleneck.

5. Ditch the dogs, boost the stars.

It's common wisdom that low-volume, low-profitability choices have no business on a menu. The opposite category — high-volume, high-profit items — should be celebrated and, if possible, expanded on.

"If you knock off items that are not performing, it gives you a chance to be creative and test new things out," says Spiegel. "If it's a chef-centric restaurant, no chef wants to be a one-note cook, they want to be known for innovation. And it will keep your staff engaged if they have an opportunity to come up with new ideas."

6. A taste of luxury goes a long way.

One way to boost the profitability of a dish is to pair inexpensive ingredients with something more exotic, then push the price point.

7. Don't forget your brand.

The experience, or what your brand represents, is something to remember when designing or revamping a menu.

In the end, engineering a better menu can be a demanding job. "But it's one of the best ways to keep focused on your business," Spiegel says. "After all, if you're not making money, what good is creativity?" ●

