

Make Your Menu Work Harder

WHETHER YOU'RE CONSIDERING A REFRESH OR AN ENTIRE OVERHAUL, HERE ARE SOME KEY TRENDS TO KEEP IN MIND.

Traditional restaurants are experiencing new forms of competition — such as delivery-only food startups, suppliers opening their own restaurants, and the meal kit phenomenon — plus extreme rent hikes, all of which are testing the strength of their businesses.

“Menus are an act of curation and an expression of your culinary point of view,” says Arlene Spiegel, founder and president of Arlene Spiegel & Associates, Inc., a full-service restaurant and hospitality consulting firm in New York City. “They exist to provide a message to reassure the culinary integrity of your establishment and elevate the dining experience for your customers,” she continues. “A well-executed menu gives customers a sense of virtuosity over their experience and reinforces your brand proposition.”

KNOW WHO YOU ARE AND SHOW IT

Industry experts agree that one of the biggest mistakes is having too much on the menu, thus muddling your brand identity and risking leaving diners with an unmemorable experience. “You can’t — and shouldn’t — try to please everyone,” says Spiegel. “You’ll wind up standing for nothing.”

STAY CURRENT BUT DON'T ADD ITEMS JUST BECAUSE THEY'RE TRENDY

Often, you can make mistakes when you incorporate trends that don't necessarily fit into the theme of your establishment. “You have to make sure the current food trends don't take you off brand,” Spiegel says.

CALL OUT YOUR VALUES AND SOURCING

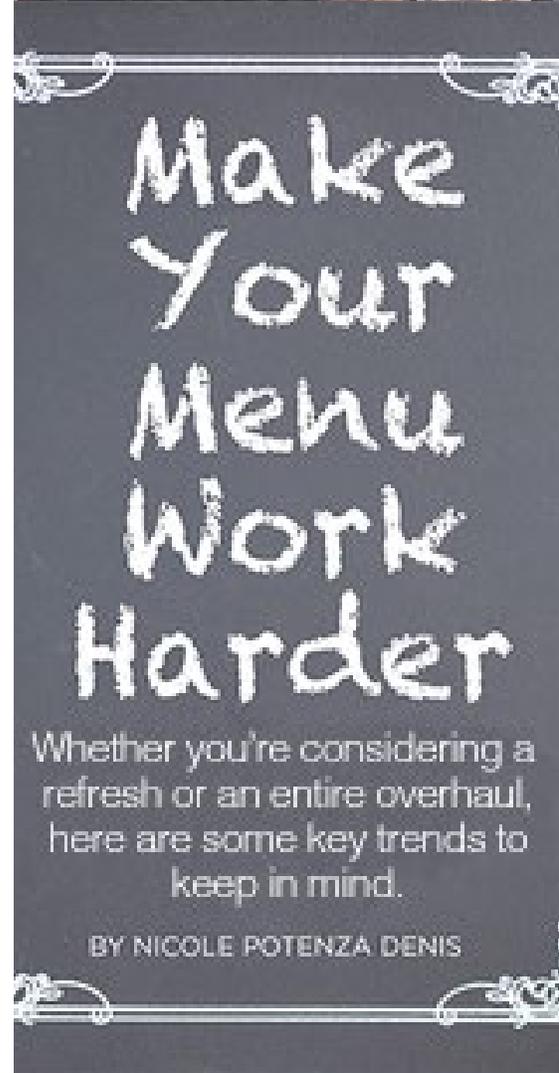
But it isn't just about creating a list of vendors. “Regardless of the type of venue, the menu is presented to show that care has gone into ingredient choice,” Spiegel says. She adds that instead of listing “bacon and egg on a roll,” the item will read “heritage bacon from so and so's farm with a free-range organic egg on a house-made roll.”

Take advantage of small plates. According to a DataSential MenuTrends service and keynote report, small plates are now found in 39 percent of casual dining restaurants, up 10 percent in the past year and 48 percent over the last four years. So, if you're a full-service restaurant, consider trading out words like “starters” and “appetizers” for “small plates” or “sharing plates.” Spiegel says, “People build their meals out of small plates and especially enjoy the fun, communal feel it gives.”

Spiegel agrees: “An online menu needs to speak higher volumes because there is no person behind the counter or a server to explain the dishes.”

OPTIMIZE YOUR MENU'S VISIBILITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

While a restaurant's highest-value clientele in today's world is the people who follow it on social media, Spiegel cautions, “an online community that becomes viral is more powerful and can be more difficult to navigate than putting an old-fashioned sign in front of your restaurant and writing your daily specials.” She says combining the value of your social media influencers with old-fashioned grassroots marketing and brand ambassadors to solicit for you, can be a win-win for menu inspiration.

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Whether you're considering a refresh or an entire overhaul, here are some key trends to keep in mind.

BY NICOLE POTENZA DENIS

