

# A Menu Makeover

## How to Create Eye-catching Menus

### Charleston Grill – French Cuisine and Southern Hospitality

Charleston Grill, inside the plush, romantic setting of Charleston Place Hotel, offers guests a night to remember while tantalizing their taste buds under the spell of award winning Executive Chef Bob Waggoner. Waggoner creates an appealing menu of lowcountry dishes and Southern hospitality that exceeds the expectations of guests. Food presentations are masterpieces.

"The single most important ingredient to the marketing strategy at Charleston Grill is the quality of our product and the strength of that quality in the marketplace," states Mickey Bakst, general manager. "The next marketing component is getting the message out to the general public. Our approach is two-pronged, beginning with national public relations, and the greatest is word of mouth."

Charleston Grill has implemented many strategies beyond the normal marketing scheme. The restaurant has a strong presence in the community, and the landmark Charleston Place Hotel dedicates itself to the local charity scene. Local print media are used, and Charleston Grill strives to give the best possible customer service to every guest. The elegant restaurant, decorated with modern artwork and a plush décor, changes menu items on a regular basis, generally prompted by local ingredients and customers' reactions to the dishes. Waggoner creates menus that are unlike any recipe or gourmet cuisine available. Not only is the presentation of gourmet cuisine an art form created under the expertise of Chef Waggoner, the food is presented by proud servers with enthusiasm and passion for what they do.

"Our location inside Charleston Place Hotel is an extra marketing bonus for us," says Bakst. "Our efforts to attract guests begin the moment they check in. Each guest receives a complimentary glass of champagne coupon upon check-in, and this invitation encourages the guest to visit the lounge and listen to the Frank Duvall Jazz Trio while enjoying the champagne. In-room marketing materials and menus are placed in all rooms. We also have

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A restaurant's menu is part of an ensemble of elements that work together to create an ambiance that brings in customers and draws them back. The menu should help to express your establishment's personality, focus your overall operations, promote profitability, establish your budget and keep your brand fresh. It says exactly who you are and what you hope to convey personality-wise. The menu must convey your restaurant's brand in a manner that makes your customers excited to be there, want to return and happily recommend it to their family and friends. The average guest spends only about three to four minutes with the menu, so it is important that your menu make a good first impression.

### What's on the Menu?

The quality and variety of a restaurant's menu certainly helps determine whether it is worthy of a customer's investment. Restaurateurs and chefs search for a perfect menu mix that maintains the delicate balance between innovation and tradition—all the time keeping a close eye on the constantly changing tastes and trends of people. Some initial questions to ask when designing a menu include:

**What foods should the menu offer?** The menu should offer a variety of flavors and tastes, yet stay within the personality of the restaurant. A menu cannot be everything to everyone, but a variety that is pleasing to the majority of patrons is needed. For example: if you operate a Southern-style restaurant, it may be important to offer a variety of Southern dishes to ensure the taste is maintained, yet you should ensure there are choices that appeal to larger audiences. The size of the menu will depend upon the concept, market and operational capabilities as well as quality and profit goals.

**What is my pricing strategy?** Pricing is important to the business as well as to the customers. Pricing should ensure the business can be profitable, but should also represent a specific value to customers. It is important to do research when selecting recipes, setting prices and finalizing the menu. Cost out each ingredient in every recipe. This will help ensure profits. There are software products to help you do this quickly. In addition to food cost, other things to consider when pricing are your competition's prices, a customer's perceived value of an item and the appropriate placement of the prices in the menu. Put prices after descriptions and make any price changes in small increments.

**How do I keep track of what is successful?** Once you have decided the menu and pricing, it is important to periodically conduct an analysis of your menu every six to 12 months. During this evaluation, look at profitability analysis and competitive menu analysis and determine what works best and what isn't working at all. You should constantly consider replacing or eliminating items that have lower-than-average popularity and produce lower-than-average sales.

### Mixing It Up

Once a menu is established, it is not only important to provide popular menu items and consistency for returning customers, but it is also critical that a restaurant continue to keep its menu fresh and updated. Ways to revitalize your menus can include:

**Periodic menu makeovers.** Adding new dishes to your menu can be a great way to revitalize your brand and keep customers intrigued. This can be through daily or weekly specials. In addition, you can add new dishes permanently to spice up the full menu.

**Seasonal offerings.** Change your menu at least twice a year to ensure you are offering the most cost-effective ingredients during each season. Don't get caught offering sides of asparagus in the middle of winter. This will keep the menu fresh while watching food costs.

**Selling extras.** Use certain areas of the menu to market other product lines such as specialty cocktails, appetizers, sides, salads, desserts and a selection of bottled wines. Do not leave parts of the menu blank. You will be surprised how much the small menu items can boost sales.

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### Designing a Fresh Look

A menu is a representation of the personality of the restaurant. It is critical for the menu and tabletops to fit in with the style of your establishment. Is it classy and sophisticated? Fun-loving and wild? Elegant yet simple? The menu must reflect that feeling for the customer, or the customer will get confused. There are many elements to consider when designing a menu:

**Color/font.** The look should be appealing and still fit in with the overall theme and ambience of the establishment. Some tips include:

- Use at least three colors and fonts on your menu.
- Use one color/font to highlight the section headers (e.g., "Appetizers").
- Use the second color/font for standard menu item names and descriptive copy.
- Use the third color/font to call attention to a few key menu items within each menu section.

**Descriptions.** Catchy descriptions help

explain what an item is and why your customer should notice it.

- A description should be limited to fewer than 15 words, giving the reader enough information while also leaving room for intrigue.
- Longer descriptions should be reserved for signature items, especially the profitable ones.
- Think about what flavors and tastes you want to convey. Words like crunchy and spicy give the customer a better idea of what something will be like.


### Photos/graphics.

- Use high-quality pictures to highlight featured menu items. Whether promoting appetizers, new menu offerings or dessert, a picture is worth a thousand words. A great photo will show your customers exactly how good the dish looks ... and why they should order it. Be sure the photo looks like the food dish, or it could pose a problem.


- The use of high-quality graphics can set items apart and increase sales by as much as 15 percent.

**Design/layout.** The design and layout should be professional and easy to read. It should also pull the customer's attention to the right spots.


- The "power position" is on the inside right page above the center. A menu item's position within a list can also affect sales. People tend to remember the top two items and the bottom item on a list.
- Categorize your menu carefully—it can affect how the guest perceives value and variety. Categorizing helps guests find what they want, leading to a quicker decision and ultimately a quicker table turn.
- Neat columns with unfussy fonts work best.
- Arrange items sequentially, with appetizers, salads and soups first, then entrees, then desserts.
- Place your best selling items, or those you want to have the biggest draw, on



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the prime "sweet spots" of the menu. Boxing selections off within your menu works well, as does adding colors, photographs, labels and logos.

- Fill space, but do not create a crowded menu.
- Be careful choosing the typeface, ink color and paper color. Make sure there is enough color contrast.
- Periodically redesigning the menus to keep them updated and fresh can also boost sales. According to restaurant consultants interviewed by Restaurants USA, menu redesign can improve sales an average of 2 to 10 percent.

**User-friendly.** If your menu creates problems for your clients, they will become apprehensive and less likely to return. Common mistakes include menus that:

- Are too small to read easily or too big to handle easily. The print should not be smaller than a 12-point font.
- Are not professional and appear cheaply made (e.g., using clip art instead of photos).
- Do not include daily or weekly special inserts.
- Have entrees that don't look like their photos.
- Show a misalignment of brand and menu.
- Have errors in the menu. (This sends a poor message about the quality of the establishment.)
- Do not offer flexibility in menu choices—75 percent of consumers customize their meals by asking for alternative preparation methods, off-the-menu orders and substitutions.
- Do not provide some nutritional value information for health-conscious customers.

#### Other Ways to Market to Customers

Ideally, the architecture, décor and tabletop design continue the anticipatory buildup, which culminates in a menu that fully expresses the style of the restaurant. Other ways to market to your customers when they visit include:

**Creative menu covers.** Covers not only keep the menus clean, but they also add to the quality and tone of the restaurant. These can range from vinyl to leather to wood depending on the cost effectiveness and personality of the restaurant.



**Eye-catching menu boards.** Menu boards can help sell specials. Use free-standing wooden-framed menu boards to advertise specials or events. Be sure size is taken into account. Use two-sided display boards at the entrance/exit to advertise the menu upon entering and exiting your restaurant.

**Appealing tabletops.** Items on the tabletops tell customers what you need them to know. Tabletop items get no respect. From the olive oils and pepper grinders to the basics of flatware and dishes, planning the tabletop isn't something most restaurateurs give much consideration. But savvy ones do.

**Talking table tents/table cards.** Having table tent marketing items separate from the menu is a great way to get them noticed. When using table tent marketing, position the most profitable item, or the item you would most like to promote, in the center of the table tent, where the customer's gaze will naturally land.

**Menu inserts.** Brand your restaurant by offering a specials menu insert that creates a sense of "You can only get this here." Menu inserts also give your servers something to talk about and keep your menu fresh. Additionally, you can use them to promote high-profit specials, foods you want to move due to over ordering or new items that could eventually move onto the regular menu.

**Consistent ambience.** Paint can be an easy, quick and cheap way to update the color palate of your restaurant and give the space a sense of currency. When budget is an issue, color makes a bold statement at an affordable price. Adding unique features and small personal touches can help your restaurant achieve its own individuality. Try adding attention-grabbing finishes to walls, tabletops or floors to keep guests intrigued.

**A creative platform.** A creative platform

is more than just a logo; it includes all graphic design elements, such as typography, background style and treatments. All of your restaurant materials should incorporate a consistent creative platform and can be applied to menus, napkins, to-go materials, etc.

Robert Welcher, president of Restaurant Consultants Inc., a full-service consulting company based in Columbus, Ohio, says, "The average customer spends about three minutes with your menu. How much is comprehended during that contact with your in-house marketing depends on how well organized it is, how readable it is, and how well it conveys the tone of the operation."

Menu marketing is important. Menus are statements of the food and drinks provided, based on the wants, needs and demands of customers. Menus are not only a list of products; they are a way for the restaurant to communicate to its customers. Menus should be well planned, appealing and practical. If menus are done well, a restaurant is more likely to win in a highly competitive market.

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