Tricks of the Trade: Learning the Menu

When I started at an authentic Mexican restaurant, I could barely pronounce the menu and had no idea what chilaquiles, tomatillos, mole sauce, carnitas, or pozole was. I thought it was downright crazy that I was expected to have the whole menu memorized in two days and be ready to take a fill-in-the-blank test over it. Although I managed to cram the night before and (barely) pass the menu test, the first couple weeks of serving weren't easy with my mediocre knowledge of the menu.

Starting a new serving gig is intimidating, and the task of learning the menu can make it extra difficult, especially now that the average number of menu items is on the rise. First-time servers have more trouble learning the menu since they are not familiar with most types of alcoholic beverages or specialty food items. Servers who have plenty of knowledge of the menu will sell more, give better customer service, and have higher priced tickets. So, don't rush training, and give them plenty of resources to learn. Here are my tips on how to train your serving staff on the menu!

Make flashcards

You can make actual flashcards with index cards, or you can use one of the many free sites that allow you to make custom flashcards and share them online. Servers can use an app and flip through the flashcards on their smart phones. I recommend you create different categories for salads, appetizers, entrees, desserts, and alcoholic beverages. This will allow servers to divide and conquer the menu! They will also get an idea of the number of items for each category. Make sure to list the name and ingredients of each item. Also point out common allergy-inducing ingredients in each dish and note if it

is gluten free. Include pictures of each menu item so that server will be able to recognize dishes at the expo line.

Another reason that online flashcards are excellent tools is because you can edit your cards on the fly! If dishes are changed, added, or no longer served, you can quickly update your flash cards without confusing new staff members.

Hold tasting classes

Make small portions of each food item and display them in front of the new servers. Describe what ingredients make up a dish and let the servers taste each one. Not only will this help servers memorize menu items but it will also give them knowledge of what they taste like. This will be helpful for when a customer inevitably asks one of your servers what their favorite thing on the menu is.

You can also use this as a chance to teach sales techniques like suggestive selling or using descriptive words to describe an item.

Look for differences or patterns

If all your wood-fire grill items have the same sides, or all the red meats are marinated in Shiner Bock and topped with a cilantro garnish, point out those types of patterns. Memorizing dishes is easier when there are similarities. On the other hand, if you have a food establishment that specializes in making a bunch of similar items, like pizzas or burgers, it is better to look at the differences. These items may be all the same but have two or three different toppings or sauces.

Give out practice tests

Make several different fill-in-the-blank practice tests that your servers can take home and use to test their knowledge. The biggest reason staff fail their first menu test is because they overestimate their memorization skills. By taking practice tests, servers can use them as a check point to figure out how much of the information they are actually absorbing and can address their problem areas.

Make a cheat sheet

Good memorization doesn't happen overnight, or even within a few days. Even if a server passes all your tests, it doesn't mean they know everything there is to know about your menu. Make laminated cards with information like daily specials or soups, beers on draft, red wines & white wines ranging from sweet to dry, and the spirits your bar carries. This kind of information is hard to remember, even after training. Servers can keep these cheat sheets in their notepads for a quick reference.

Don't forget to get creative. People learn in different ways, so always try out new training ideas on staff and ask for feedback.

Use the right tools

Creative ideas and good techniques are very useful for training, but they won't reach their full efficacy if not everyone is following the process and parts are skipped or forgotten. The right program, such as [a powerful applicant tracking system](#) with built-in onboarding tools, can help you define and enforce the training process you want your business to follow. [ApplicantForge](#) features onboarding tools that allow

you to upload documents such as menu tests or certifications, create training checklists, set reminders for managers, and more. These tools make implementing training processes and techniques a breeze, no matter what they may be.

Training up your new staff members isn't always easy, but using good tools and techniques make it much simpler and more effective, and it will be well worth the effort when your business flourishes and your servers and customers are happier!