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It Just Makes Sense

Matching Your Menu to Your Concept

What might seem hip and eclectic to one crowd might seem like a big mess to another. That is why it is crucial to be in touch with your market and understand your concept from your guest point of view. Otherwise, you might be headed for disaster.

By Amelia Levin

Menus don't exist in a vacuum. They live within the four walls of your restaurant. And even if you don't think you have a well-defined concept, your guests have sized up your business as casual, fun, date night, family, eclectic, hip and a thousand other descriptors. The many moving parts that combine to create your restaurant have to fit. As this article underscores, restaurant consultants will always tell you to go back to your concept in everything you do, from the design and décor of your space, to your logo, signage, service style and, of course, food and menu.

In short, matching your menu to your concept — and vice versa — creates authenticity and consistency that helps build trust with your customers. They know why they visited and why they should return.

"The 'art' of menu development is really about understanding at a gut level what's driving your concept," says Rudy Miick, FCSI, CMC, principal of Miick & Associates, a Boulder, Colorado-based restaurant and business

consultancy. What are you trying to accomplish? "Conceptually, is it bar food, appetizers and tapas?" Miick says. Are your guests predominantly families, couples, business people or college students? First and foremost, the menu has to make sense in the context of the name, the atmosphere and the market.

"If I'm a burger joint or a steakhouse I wouldn't suddenly throw a seaweed salad on the menu," Miick says. Sure, there are exceptions to every rule, and some concepts, like Hub 51 in Chicago offering sushi along with burgers and other foods, define themselves by their eclectic, playful menus.

That can be risky business for operations that don't exist in a market in which they can position themselves likewise. What might seem hip and eclectic to one crowd might seem like a big mess to another. That is why it is crucial to be in touch with your market and understand your concept from your guests' point of view. Otherwise, you might be headed for disaster.

Confusion always starts with the owners. "Most chef operators will be food-driven," Miick says. "Most nonchef operators will go toward a service concept and overall idea like a hip bistro or sports bar." Ideally, the chef and nonchef owners will get on the proverbial same page. If there is a palpable gap between atmosphere and menu, the confusion can often overwhelm patrons, which is not conducive to repeat business.

Consider the menu offering of a very good pizza in an Irish pub concept. Most new guests would visit the business looking toward a very specific experience, such as an ample beer selection and traditional Irish pub fare such as fish and chips and shepherd's pie. This is an extreme example, but you can imagine more subtle blurring of the lines.

Don't Get Carried Away

A sure way to create confusion is to have too many items on the menu. Miick recommends sticking to no more than 40 items. "The kiss of death for a startup is having 400 inventory items. I want as few ingredients as possible while still offering as much variety as possible," he says, pointing out that even though The Cheesecake Factory, for example, has more than 100 menu choices, they use the same few meats, vegetables and spices in different ways. In fact, it's rare for successful restaurants like The Cheesecake Factory or Wolfgang Puck's restaurants or Michel Richard's restaurants to not use one ingredient at least four or five different ways, he says.

Again, exceptions to the rule might include breakfast concepts, which can offer numerous egg-based items. If you have an expert pastry chef, you might be able to have a larger dessert menu than most. If you cater to a late-night, dine-at-the-bar crowd, you will want to have an ample selection of appetizers and shareable items. Think what makes sense from your typical customers' point of view. (See "Bigger Isn't Always Better" on Page 18.)

Authenticity

Authenticity is particularly vital when developing a regional or ethic-flavored concept. We all know amazing hidden gems, such as Vietnamese or Mexican restaurants with middle school cafeteria atmospheres, which are packed seven days a week; however, the food has to be the "real deal" to make that work. Simply placing Tex-Mex in the name of the restaurant won't mean a thing if the fare doesn't live up to the promise.

When restaurateur Peter Karpinski, co-founder and COO of the Denver-based Sage Restaurant Group and a successful brand creator, sought out designing the menu for the recently opened Kachina Southwestern Grill in Westminster, Colorado, the team had to really zero in on what "Southwestern cuisine" means, looking at both authentic, historical dishes native to the region as well as modern ideas.

"From the beginning there was a tremendous amount of R&D," Karpinski says. "We sent all of our chefs and business leaders and mixologists on a couple of trips throughout the Southwest." The trips turned into traditional road trips; the team ate at all different restaurants, studied their menus, and talked to people about cooking and eating.

What they found was a blend of classic Native American cuisine using "three sisters" corn, squash and beans and Navajo "fry" bread, blended with green chili-spiked New Mexican cuisine and the free-range game meats of Colorado.

"We took a historical look at how Southwestern cuisine has evolved over the years with all the influences from different peoples and parts of the world," Karpinski says. For instance, when the Spanish came through the area, they brought certain spices and ingredients with them. Southwestern cuisine also draws influences like chili peppers and corn from Mexicans who also settled in the area. "We're not a Mexican restaurant, but we use those Mexican ingredients that have influenced Southwestern cuisine," such as Navajo fry bread tacos with epazote-braised beef and black bean puree and chipotle, Karpinski says.

Kachina's other focus on sustainability and "getting back to the land" meant sourcing locally and seasonally was important. Colorado lamb, bison, and elk show up in different areas of the menu, for a lamb sausage here and a homemade charcuterie platter there.

The menu is the strongest driver of creating that authentic scene or experience. "If we have a restaurant that's modern Asian we want them to feel like they're in that part of the world," Karpinski says.

Even if your guest isn't an expert on the regional or ethnic cuisine, if you take this kind of effort to develop the menu, and take an opportunity to educate your guests on the method behind the madness, they will sense the authenticity.

Still, you can't leave your market behind in the quest for authenticity, and it can be somewhat of a balancing act.

While Karpinski's team ventured out of traditional norms with their creative ingredient combinations, they knew they couldn't go too far. This is where knowing and understanding your main demographics comes into play. Kachina is located in a Colorado suburb between Denver and Boulder. "It's not like we're in downtown Manhattan with sophisticated, well-traveled people where you can really push the envelope," Karpinski says. "We're in an area where we want to have enough food that's approachable by the masses but at the same time we wanted to introduce our spin on things while showcasing products that are really authentic to the region."

Karpinski's team had to be careful how they defined the Mexican, New Mexican and European influences influencing the menu. "Most Americans today are much more used to mainstream American-Mexican food and particularly by big chains," he says. "That's why we wanted to offer a unique, independent experience, but at the same time not go so over the top that it will intimidate people."

Developing the menu around familiar foods like tacos and grilled meats allowed the group to maintain an approachable menu, but introduce new ingredients and combinations of ingredients that would show their creativity. Remaining true to the authentic brand is another way to educate your diners.

"There's no doubt people will walk in and say, 'where are the burritos,' and 'can we have chips and salsa on the table?'" Karpinski says. "We have a lot of influence from Texas cuisine, but not a whole section for chili or fajitas."

In more sophisticated and adventurous markets, you might be able to take more risk. Nevertheless, your concept and menu has to be well-defined, even if guests can't easily articulate it. At TIKL in Miami, Chef Simon Stojanovic and team focused on both the changing dining scene in the area as well as the demographics they wanted to focus on.

"We wanted to appeal to a younger demographic and knew that this group likes to try a whole bunch of dishes and share with their friends," Stojanovic says. "We tried to anticipate how the dining scene is changing, too. There are a lot of places still with sharable small-plate menus and every single one of them is busy."

The small plates menu also caters to young professionals wanting a small bite during lunch breaks, or a quick snack and drink after work.

The Gear That Supports the Menu Can Support the Concept

Generally speaking, equipment selection should come after developing the menu, but sometimes menu items can be developed around a special piece of equipment, such

BIGGER ISN'T ALWAYS BETTER

When you stroll down the aisles of a typical supermarket or watch television for more than a few minutes, you are slammed with the seemingly infinite choices of food available to the U.S. consumer. That's why it's tempting to offer a supermarket of choices on your menu. Slow down. The number of menu items on the menu is critical to cost and quality control. Vary it enough to interest the guest, but limit choices to maintain control.

Many restaurateurs make the mistake of trying to be all things to all people. On any given menu, 50 percent of the menu offerings typically produce 70 percent to 80 percent of the popularity. Theoretically, that means you might be able to dump half your items and still maintain 80 percent of your sales. Now, in practice, some of those less popular items are necessary to carry your concept, please your spouse, and/or cater to smaller but important customer groups (e.g., children, vegetarians, folks on low-fat diets). The important thing is to understand the trade-offs, and have a strategic reason for every item on your menu, not just to take up space.

Establish early what you do well, and what you want to be known for, and then do it. Size of the menu will depend upon the concept, market, operational capabilities, as well as quality and profit goals. A general rule of thumb: The more items on the menu, the higher the food cost. If, in your circumstances, you feel the need for an "extensive" menu, then make sure you design the menu with a limited inventory, and have strong "cross-utilization," or use the same ingredients across several menu items.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? EVERYTHING

What your menu items are called can have a great effect on their connection to your concept and how well they sell. Psychologists have tested and studied how people act around and think about food. The comedic team Penn & Teller once produced a documentary to debunk the notion that fast-food chains are somehow using sinister techniques to keep people addicted to their food.

In one of the scenes, the entertainers Penn & Teller met with Cornell University's Dr. Brian Wansink, who used KFC products to make soup and then served it in really fancy dishes and told participants in a focus group that the products were made by a top chef. Wansik then asked what they thought about what they had just eaten. The result is just what you might expect. They all thought the soup was excellent, and of the highest-quality ingredients.

Here's an experiment you can try: Bake a pie. You can even use a frozen pie if you like, but you will want to bake it fresh so it's warm out of the oven when you serve it to your focus group. Once the pie has cooled, place slices on two different styles of plates. Then tell your focus group participants that one slice is regular apple pie a la mode. We'll call that Slice A. Next, tell these same people that the other pie sample is Grandma Lee's Before the War Pie. Tell them that General Lee had a grandmother who made terrific apple pie. And wherever General Lee went, he always had that recipe with him and insisted that every baker who ever baked for him had to use that recipe. In fact, when he died, he had that recipe in his lapel pocket.

After you tell the story, allow your focus group to try both slices of pie and ask for their impression. What happens next will surprise you. They will see a difference in the pies; but hold on. It gets better. Once you're finished with the experiment, tell them the truth; you made it all up, and see what happens. Those who have conducted this experiment found that the guests won't believe you. They'll stick to their initial view and insist that there is a vast difference between the two slices of pie.

The point is not to deceive your guests, but to be cognizant that they are influenced by the names of menu items. Tell your story truthfully. Use names that are accurate but compliment the concept. For example, "tacos de pescado" is Spanish for "fish tacos," but it might support your Mexican concept so much better than the English translation, and fulfills your guests' expectations and experience. On the other hand, if your concept is a California-style beach café, "fish tacos" as a name is most likely the better choice.

as a beautifully made wood-burning oven. At Kachina, a traditional, adobe clay oven bakes bread dough and flatbreads, just like what the Pueblos used for cooking. A traditional flat-top plancha grill sears meats and fish just as the Spanish might have cooked when living in the Southwest. Extra refrigerated prep tables and a sausage grinder make up the charcuterie-making area of the kitchen. And, a custom-made, roving cart for elotes and agua frescas on the patio is "our version of a tableside guacamole cart," Karpinski says.

At TIKL, Stojanovic sourced a robata grill to fit his Asian-inspired menu. Robatas are traditional Japanese grills that use a special type of charcoal for a hot, less smoky sear, delicate enough to handle fresh seafood.

Using the same equipment used by people from that culture sends another strong message of concept authenticity, and it ensures that the stated menu items taste the way they should. A Neapolitan pizza concept might want to use a wood-fired oven versus a conveyor oven to cook its pies, just as a Chinese-inspired restaurant would use a wok instead of a sauté pan for its stir-fried dishes.

Open kitchens allow restaurants to showcase interesting cooking equipment and methods. If wood-fired pizza is a signature item, you want to show off your wood-fired ovens. Make a big deal about the special gear and cooking techniques, which speak to your authenticity.

Finally, Don't Overlook the Physical Menu

Don't forget that your presentation method is another part of your overall brand message. If you are building a concept around supporting sustainable agriculture, you need to carry your environmental commitment in every corner of the restaurant. In regard to the menu, for example, you might want to use recycled paper and soy-based ink for your menus, and then print that message at the bottom of the menu.

If your concept is sleek, urban and high-tech, you might take the lead from new, young demographic-oriented restaurants that are turning to electronic tablets to showcase their food, wine and cocktails. In a family restaurant, such an expense might simply go to waste and, worse, be an unappreciated distraction.

In any event, as noted by Jim Laube, restaurant consultant and president of RestaurantOwner.com, don't be afraid to "tell your quality story."

"Chances are pretty good that you go to a lot more trouble preparing your food than your customers give you credit for," Laube says. "That may be partially your fault for not telling them. If you make your own dough, or prepare your sauces from scratch, use your menu to tell them. The back cover can be an excellent place to tell your guests all the little things you do and the special, high-quality ingredients you use. Not everyone will take note but some will and it may play a role in where they decide to go the next time they eat out." RS&G