

## Keeping Your Menu Competitive with Well-Timed Updates

Even franchises change their menus, in large part because of an increasingly savvy dining public. With more people going out to dinner more often, the question isn't if you're going to change your menu but when.

### Staying flexible when you first open

Give your menu a chance to work. After a change or new opening, allow at least a couple weeks or maybe a month to let people get familiar with your offerings, try out several different things, and establish favourites. Watch for trends at different times of the day and different meal periods. If your appetizers are selling better at lunch than at dinner, try to figure out why.

Don't get locked into a tiered menu pricing system (requires all appetizers to be £x, all entrees to be £y, and so on) with no room for change. If your appetizer list is really working well but no one is interested in ordering the crab-stuffed mushrooms, you may want to consider dropping the price by a little. Be open to that possibility. Ultimately, diners determine what works and what doesn't based on their willingness to buy menu items.

### Revisiting your menu later on

Ultimately, when you change your menu, you're trying to capture that new prospective diner and keep him coming to your restaurant while keeping your signature dishes that made you successful to begin with. Here are a few reasons you may want to change your menu:

\* Keep up with rising (or falling) trends and competition in dining: Being at the forefront of the "wraps" trend was great, but if you're still tied to it, that's not so good. If the steakhouse down the street is packing them in and your steakhouse is empty, figure out why. Look at your competitor's menu and analyse what it's doing right and wrong. You can capitalize on its mistakes and improve on its successes.

\* Adjust for seasonality: You may want to take advantage of the seasonal produce and other items. Or if you live in an area that sees dramatic climate changes, you may want to consider embracing the way dining habits change with the seasons. So in July you may include a gazpacho (a light, fresh, cold veggie soup) on your menu but replace it with beef stew in October. Seasonality dramatically affects top-end restaurants, but it's less important if you don't promise fresh items to your diners.

\* Generate new excitement within your concept: You always want to be faithful to your original ideas, but you can still try new items. If the name of your restaurant is Taco Shack, don't put lasagna on the menu just because you read an Italian cookbook this week. Instead, consider adding a taco bowl or a shredded beef option to your taco menu. You can also make these changes to showcase trendy, new, popular ingredients; celebrate holidays; or commemorate local activities.

Changing an entire menu isn't *effective*. Your regular patrons walked in your door for a reason. They probably developed favourites and may not come back if they can't get them. Plus, changing an entire menu isn't *efficient*; many hidden costs are associated with changing your menu including testing and tasting new recipes, reprinting the menu, retraining your staff (both kitchen and floor), retooling your processes, and reprogramming your ordering system.

## Paying attention to specials

### There are three big reasons to run specials:

1. To showcase limited availability and truly special things: Maybe you can order Copper River salmon (wild Alaskan salmon available only a few months each year) and want to offer it to your customers.
2. To create efficiency within your inventory by reducing waste from perishables going bad before they're sold: Specials can re-purpose these ingredients at a discounted price to sell them before they perish. But make it "special".

Never use specials as the last stop before the trash. If you're concerned that a perishable may have already perished, toss it. Don't risk making someone sick and ruining your reputation just to save a few bucks. When in doubt, throw it out!

3. To promote your favourite, high-margin items: You can offer items at a discount, hoping to increase customer counts and increase profits. You can even create a regular weekly schedule for specials (Thursday is chimichanga day, for example) so diners know what to expect and put you on their calendar.

One added benefit of changing the menu is *your staff will be excited by the change*. Consider giving your cooks or culinary team an opportunity to create items when you plan on offering specials or doing a menu revision. They get a chance to be creative, which usually increases morale.

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