

Menu Makeup

BY ETHEL HAMMER

How easy is it to change a menu? “This is a very touchy, dangerous subject. Change is very, very difficult for restaurants,” says menu consultant Phyllis Ann Marshall, principal of FoodPower, a restaurant-industry consulting company in Costa Mesa, Calif. “What’s good for the chef and what’s good for the restaurant are often different.”

“You have to know the non-sellers, the money-makers, the imperatives and the dogs,” says Stephen Kleiman, director of foodservice for the Felician Sisters Convent, Chicago, who has taught menu consulting at the college level.

If that’s the case, why do many chefs or consultants come in, change things drastically—and close the restaurant? They looked at trends, exercised their creativity and did demographics. So what went wrong? The answer is simple, according to Marshall: “They didn’t factor in the emotional impact of the changes on guests.”

“Your menu is probably the main marketing tool that allows you to communicate with your public,” says Bill Guilfoyle, associate professor in business management at The Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, N.Y.

In other words, your menu is your face.

Who are you serving?

Since diner emotional response is crucial, do you know your diners and what they like? For demographics, Marshall relies on statistics from the local Chamber of Commerce. She also “googles” on the Internet.

In fact, doing a demographic analysis in terms of income, age, occupation, lifestyle, consumer habits and location finds the CIA’s Guilfoyle using the terms “baby boomers,” “generation X” and “gen Y.”

“Baby boomers are going to

What is—and isn’t—on the menu is a restaurant’s public face. Menu consultants step in when it’s time for a new look.

be the longest lived, healthiest mature market in history,” Guilfoyle says. Born between 1946 and 1964, baby boomers seek healthy items, and are increasingly concerned with their cholesterol and fat intake, he says. Issues of wholesome foods, fats, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and organics are relevant to them.

Baby boomers comprise 75 million souls, generation X, 45 million, and gen Y, 72 million customers, according to Guilfoyle. The size of these groups explains why marketers and menu consultants are keeping their eyes peeled.

These huge numbers also explain why some take a different tack.



Phyllis Ann Marshall has a system of taking items off the menu without creating trauma by converting them into specials.





ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS REED

“We look at a world model, and see how involved people are in an orientation or in a world of activities,” says Blaine Becker, director of marketing for The Hartman Group, a consumer-research company in Bellevue, Wash. “Trying to categorize the behavior of baby boomers born between 1946 and 1964 across such a broad range can be so difficult. It’s kind of insane. Just because you’re a certain age or live in a certain neighborhood or are a certain ethnicity doesn’t mean you act in a

certain way.”

Instead, his team looks at worldviews, and involvements such as interest in organics and health and wellness. Still, within these worldviews, Becker and The Hartman Group’s clients are still fascinated by the baby boomers, because their sheer numbers have such a significant impact on the market.

The pull of prestige

So, as a menu consultant, what’s your competitive edge?

Gordon Maybury, executive chef at The Peninsula New York, does menu consulting for Frankfurt, Germany-based Lufthansa airline.

“Lufthansa wanted a partnership with a known, high-end hotel,” Maybury says. So, three Peninsula Hotel chefs—Maybury in New York, Terry Crandall in Chicago and Sean Hardy in Beverly Hills—each consult for two months, at which time the ball shifts to the next chef.

While most competitors are cutting back on food, Lufthansa chose to replicate dishes on The Peninsula’s menu as closely as possible. Excessively costly and exotic offerings were nixed. Chicken with lemon/garlic/rosemary rub was substituted for guinea hen. And venison was not an option.

“Since an airline facility caters maybe 20,000 meals a day, you take what you have here and drop it down a level,” Maybury says. His halibut with vanilla and lemon thyme made it onto the menu. So did his turkey escalope with sweet-potato gratin; steamed tofu with portobello/warm-vegetable salad; and saffron fettuccine with roasted vegetables and a light tomato broth.

“Anything at 30,000 feet is going to taste different. Flavors change with pressure,” Maybury adds, noting that all dishes are checked for taste in flight.

Winning with niche knowledge

While Maybury works from the perch of a high-end chef at a prestigious hotel, Ron Pickarski, chef/owner of Eco-Cuisine, Inc., a foodservice/food-technology consulting company in Boulder, Colo., stresses his expertise from a different perch. He brings expertise as an R&D chef who formulates and manufactures dry vegetarian and vegan blends that approximate nonvegetarian taste.



Ron Pickarski's vegetarian and vegan blends serve health-conscious consumers who eat vegetarian foods as part of a healthy dietary lifestyle and want those items to be flavorful.

“Approximately 35% of Americans are health-conscious consumers, eating vegetarian foods as part of a healthy dietary lifestyle. And they will not sacrifice taste for health,” he says.

At Carlton College [Northfield, Minn.], which will begin using Eco-Cuisine products in February 2007, Pickarski says 400 of the approximately 1,000 students are vegetarian. Other college campuses already use his “chicken breast”—made from a blended mix with reactive flavors, soy, wheat and carageenan—in ways that include cacciatore, piccata and roasts. His “ground-beef” mix, based on textured soy protein, is used to translate conventional chili, bolognese sauce, Salisbury steak, meatloaf and burgers.

Pickarski substituted seitan fillets, made from his seitan quick-mix at 90 cents a pound, in place of venison, at \$17 a pound, for the signature dish at a Rocky Mountain fine-dining restaurant. The seitan forms the vegan base of Rocky Mountain “venison” with mashed potatoes, roasted garlic and fresh sage, served with a forager sauce and braised field greens.

He also offers sausages, bakery

goods and cookies, as well as gluten-free products for celiacs. “I focus on operations. You can just plug my products in for the protein and you get a vegetarian view of the meat dish being eaten by other diners,” he says.

Pickarski is at the tip of a niche market that seems to be growing. In a recent poll taken by a large food-service provider, 25% of students said they wanted vegan dining. With exclusively vegan products, Pickarski easily segues into the campus-dining market.

Creative edge

Chef Robin Schempp, on the other hand, stresses her knowledge of culinology and her ability to operate at the forefront of culinary knowledge. A member of the Atlanta-based Research Chefs Association and a board member of the Chefs Collaborative, Boston, Schempp, principal of Right Stuff Enterprises in Waterbury, Vt., specializes in product, concept and menu development. “I often work for manufacturers,” she says, noting recent work with the Almond Board of California in Modesto, Calif., which wanted new ideas for schools, quick-service restaurants, fine dining, bakery and cafes.

“The biggest mistake is resistance to change. People think customers want what they don’t want,” Schempp says, noting the importance of being innovative and taking risks.

To forge ahead, Schempp uses two lines of inquiry: the “trickle-up” effect—what people think is homey and what they are buying at the supermarket—and the “trickle-down” effect, which relies on understanding and translating ideas used by high-end chefs. Currently, Schempp has her eye on Grant Achatz, Alinea, Chicago; Ferrán Adrià, El Bulli, Rosas, Spain; Heston Blumenthal, The Fat Duck, Bray, Berkshire, England; and Wylie Dufresne, wd-50, New York.

“I extrapolate from them,” she says, adding that it may take a year or more before her results are seen on the market.

Taking care of details

Not everybody needs a star to make their menu a success. “People don’t know the very narrow profit margins. For this, you just need somebody who’s sharp and knows the industry,” says Maybury.

“It’s hard to believe how many people don’t figure out the plate cost. A lot of people open a restaurant and put down prices that don’t have anything to do with the food cost, labor cost and administrative cost,” Kleiman says.

Marshall has a system of taking items off the menu without creating trauma by converting them into specials.

For her work in the schools, Schempp relies on knowledge of financial and nutritional guidelines, plus knowledge of foods normally

provided to schools free or at reduced cost.

“Aside from chicken, kids don’t eat much protein,” says Schempp, who fulfilled important government protein guidelines while serving her client, the Almond Board of California, by creating a recipe that added almond butter to the canned peaches given to schools free or with deep discounts.

Orchestrating a great menu crescendo

Not every menu consultant works for high-end restaurants, industry, government or large corporations. There is a world of smaller operators who might need the skills of a menu consultant, says Kleiman. “Menu consultant” is often built into the job description when an operation hires a new chef, too.

“Restaurateurs tend to know the type of restaurant they want, the cuisine, the price point and the ambiance,” Kleiman says. Intuition,

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Phyllis Ann Marshall

trend analysis, demographics, price point, presentation and preparation are the first stage. “They’re the fun part,” he adds. “The second level of menu realization involves dealing with hard realities—the very things you know, such as how much money you want to make, and labor needs.”

Here, the availability of vendors is crucial. So are decisions about the

advisability of scratch cooking versus using prepared foods. “While using locally grown foods is the present trend, this presents its own problems involved with seasonality, necessitating constant menu changes,” Kleiman says.

In fact, the onslaught of practical issues never stops. How will the menu fit into the foodservice marketing plan? Will the equipment dictate the menu, or will the menu dictate the equipment? Does the service style suit the menu? Or must the menu adapt to the service style? “You have to ask these questions, and more,” Kleiman says.

The menu consultant can also help with the tough financial questions. First, is there sufficient money to open the restaurant? Then, is there enough to keep it running? If not, the menu consultant can adjust the food cost, price point and labor cost, and point out administrative costs, too, to help make running the restaurant more feasible. “These questions are ‘outside eyes,’ giving the owner strategic insights that can lead to success or failure,” Kleiman says.

“The consultant should standardize as many recipes as possible to assure consistency and quality and to reduce waste, leaving the chef’s creativity to the daily specials,” he adds. Advising on software packages for constant menu engineering and restaurant operation is also part of the job, as is securing a beverage consultant so that the wine list and the menu are complementary.

Last of all, the menu consultant must work with trainers to make sure the front of the house and the back of the house are fully coordinated to realize the menu concepts. “The menu may be your soloist, but it’s the inner voices that give you the great crescendo,” Kleiman says. □

Eitel Hammer is based in Chicago.

Staging the New Menu Mix

Contrary to the opinions of quick-fix artists, menu consulting encompasses far more than changing chicken *paprikash* to organic chicken with chanterelles, or deciding to serve more bubbly water or Spanish wines.

“Changing a menu is a series of events and doesn’t happen overnight. It has to be fun. You have to get the whole team—managers, servers, busboys—to embrace it,” says Phyllis Ann Marshall, principal of FoodPower, Costa Mesa, Calif. “If you can do that, it can turn into a tremendous profit center, and build press.”

Marshall’s process has six steps.

1. Study the restaurant’s history, analyzing as many old menus, service procedures and details as possible.
2. Do a historical analysis, identifying the menu’s “core” and determining what items are least popular or least profitable.
3. Consider the location of the

restaurant and the demographics of the current guests, as well as the fringe you wish to attract.

4. Do a competitive analysis to fully understand the dining-out patterns of the neighborhood.

5. Add a bit of gradual, gentle updating to the core menu in keeping with national and local trends, and add a few exciting new items.

6. Run items that are removed from the menu as specials for a few weeks to invite guests in for their favorites on special nights.

And realize that the process can take time. One of Marshall’s clients, a classic Southern California restaurant in business for more than 40 years, worked for a year instituting quarterly changes, gradually changing the format and items to achieve greater popularity and profitability, and increasing the lunch check average by \$2.