



# MENU ENGINEERING

How a Business-Minded Chef  
Designs Menus That Perform

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## Introduction

Most chefs are taught how to cook, not how to think commercially.

They are taught execution, timing, pressure, standards, and discipline. They learn how to get through service, how to lead a section, how to plate under pressure, and how to survive difficult environments. All of that matters. It is part of becoming a professional.

But very few chefs are taught how a menu actually performs as a business tool.

That gap is bigger than it looks.

Because a menu is not just a list of dishes. It is one of the strongest forces inside the business. It influences stock-holding, supplier relationships, labour pressure, section load, speed of service, customer behaviour, spend per guest, perceived value, repeat business, and profit.

A business-minded chef understands that.

They do not look at a menu and ask only, "Is this good food?"

They ask:

- What does this dish do for the business?
- What does it do to labour?
- What does it do to contribution?
- What does it do to the guest's experience?
- What does it do over a full season, not just a single service?

That is the standard this book is built on.

This is not an academic finance book disguised for chefs. It is not a consultant's manual written from outside the kitchen. It is a practical guide for chefs who want to think more clearly, design more intelligently, and understand one of the most important responsibilities in any venue: the menu.

By the end of this book, you should not only understand menu engineering more clearly.

You should start seeing menus differently. That is the real goal.

02

**The Truth  
About Menus**

Most chefs never learn how menus actually work.

Not in culinary school.

Not in apprenticeship.

Not during service.

Not even after years in the industry.

They learn how to cook.

They learn how to execute.

They learn how to survive pressure.

But they rarely learn how menus make money.

That is where the gap begins.

Kitchens do not struggle only because food is poor. In fact, many venues serving very good food still struggle badly. They struggle because the menu is not doing enough for the business. It is not structured properly. It is not controlling cost well enough. It is not guiding customer behaviour effectively. It is not supporting labour productivity. It is not delivering value in a way that protects both guest satisfaction and commercial performance.

Most menus are treated as creative documents. A reflection of style. A response to trends. A way to keep things interesting. A way to please ownership, regulars, or the chef's own instincts.

A business-minded chef sees something bigger.

They understand that the menu is one of the most powerful operating systems in the venue.

It affects:

- what the business buys
- how much stock is held
- how much trim and waste is created
- how much prep the team must carry
- how many skilled labour hours are needed
- which sections get overloaded
- how guests move through the meal
- how much they spend
- how they feel after eating
- whether they come back
- whether the business makes enough money

That is not a small role.

This is why two kitchens can feel equally busy and have very different outcomes.

One venue can do strong covers, feel flat out all day, and still disappoint financially at the end of the month. Another can do similar or even lower volume, but because the menu is better structured, spend per guest is higher, labour is better balanced, contribution is stronger, and the guest journey is more complete.

The difference is not always talent.

Very often, the difference is menu design.

Many menus are not truly designed. They are assembled.

Built from:

- old favourites
- chef preference
- supplier suggestions
- habit
- pressure to keep changing
- what seems likely to sell
- what sounds good at the time

That is understandable. The industry moves fast. Many chefs inherit menus. Many venues react constantly. Many operators want change quickly.

But reaction is not design.

And when the menu is built reactively, the cost of that decision usually appears later.

A dish is never just a dish.

Every dish is a decision.

A financial decision.

An operational decision.

A labour decision.

A customer behaviour decision.

A positioning decision.

Add a dish, and you may also be adding:

- one more supplier line
- one more prep burden
- one more point of spoilage
- one more training issue
- one more bottleneck during peak service
- one more low-contribution item that feels busy but does not leave enough behind

A business-minded chef understands that food and business are not separate conversations. They are part of the same system.

This is also why many chefs have been let down by the way the industry teaches them.

They are often taught:

- technique over thinking
- execution over contribution
- speed over commercial awareness
- pressure management over financial understanding

So if you have never looked at a menu through this lens before, that is not because you lack ability. It is because the industry rarely teaches the commercial side at the level it should.

The business-minded chef closes that gap.

They understand that beyond taste and appearance, a menu must also answer bigger questions:

- Does this menu guide the guest toward a complete and satisfying spend journey?
- Does it leave room for starters, add-ons, dessert, or coffee?
- Does it balance indulgence with lighter choices?
- Does it support customer wellbeing, not just immediate appetite?
- Does it use labour intelligently?
- Does it make use of the season?
- Does it protect value while keeping financial leakage under control?

That is where menu engineering becomes more than dish labels and percentage math.

It becomes a way of thinking.

A business-minded chef does it this way.

They do not ask only, "Is this dish good?"

They ask:

- What does this dish do for the business?
- What does it do over a week?
- What does it do over a season?
- What does it do to the guest's overall experience?
- What does it do to the annual result if we repeat this decision consistently?

That last question matters.

Because small menu mistakes, repeated over time, become big money.

If one dish is under-contributing by just \$3 and sells 40 times per week, that is \$120 per week in missed contribution.

Over a year, that becomes \$6,240 from one item.

Now imagine four or five dishes behaving like that.

This is why menu thinking has to mature.

The menu is not just what the kitchen sells.

It is how the kitchen behaves, how the guest spends, and how the business performs.

Once you understand that properly, it becomes very hard to go back to looking at menus the old way.

03

**Your Menu Is  
Your Business**

A menu is not simply part of the business.

In many ways, the menu is the business.

That is because almost everything important in a venue flows from it.

The menu determines:

- what ingredients are bought
- how much stock is carried
- what prep the team must complete
- what level of skill is needed
- what the guest expects
- how the guest orders
- what contribution each sale creates
- whether the venue is easier or harder to run

A business-minded chef understands that when the menu is wrong, almost everything else becomes harder.

## Cost structure starts with the menu

Every menu creates a cost structure.

If a menu has:

- too many proteins
- too many one-off ingredients
- poor cross-utilisation
- multiple fragile garnishes
- complex low-volume items

it usually also has:

- higher stockholding
- more spoilage
- more ordering complexity
- lower purchasing power
- more hidden waste

Now compare that to a menu designed with intelligent overlap.

For example:

- one roasted pumpkin element used across a breakfast dish, salad, and side
- one herb yoghurt used in two mains and one share plate
- one pickled onion batch appearing across burger, bowl, and starter
- one chicken preparation working in salad, sandwich, and plated main
- one tomato base feeding shakshuka, pasta, and braised item

To the guest, that menu can still feel varied.

But underneath, it behaves very differently:

- lower waste
- stronger margin control
- simpler ordering
- easier prep planning
- better stock rotation
- better supplier leverage

That is the kind of invisible strength a business-minded chef looks for.

## **Labour structure starts with the menu too**

This is one of the most overlooked parts of menu design.

Many chefs understand food cost better than labour productivity, yet labour can damage a venue just as quickly.

A menu directly shapes labour demand.

If the venue's wage budget allows for a certain number of kitchen hours, then the menu must perform inside that reality. Not in an imaginary kitchen with unlimited senior chefs, but in the actual workplace, with the actual roster, wage conditions, and skill mix available.

A business-minded chef understands that highly skilled chefs cost more, and rightly so. The goal is not to avoid them. The goal is to use them strategically.

Highly skilled chefs should be used where their wage cost produces high value:

- section leadership
- butchery
- sauce work
- quality control
- systems design
- troubleshooting
- training juniors
- executing genuinely technical or high-risk tasks

What does not make sense is using expensive senior labour for repetitive low-value prep that could be standardised, simplified, or delegated.

Juniors and apprentices are not just cheaper hands. When used properly, they are part of the labour strategy. They can support:

- repetitive bulk prep
- basic mise en place
- controlled garnish work
- low-risk assembly
- stock rotation
- basic production tasks
- supported service roles

But that only works if the menu is designed with labour productivity in mind.

If every dish requires:

- high precision
- multiple à la minute finishes
- section-specific complexity
- excessive garnish work
- no shared components

then the venue becomes dependent on more senior labour across more hours. Productivity drops. Stress rises. Labour cost climbs. Training becomes harder.

A better-designed menu does the opposite.

It allows the venue to:

- use senior chefs where they create the most return
- support juniors with clear systems
- balance section load
- increase usable output per labour hour
- improve service consistency
- reduce unnecessary pressure

This is where labour productivity becomes important.

Being on the roster is not the same as being productive.

A chef can be present for eight hours and still be operating inside a menu system that wastes their time. Too many low-volume prep tasks, too many dish-specific components, too many last-minute burdens, too many poorly balanced sections.

A business-minded chef sees that.

They ask:

- What does this dish cost in prep time?
- What does it cost in service pressure?
- Which section carries it?
- Does it require a senior hand, or can it be standardised?
- Is the labour burden justified by the contribution?

That is menu design at a higher level.

## **Section balance matters**

Some menus create operational imbalance without it being obvious on paper.

For example:

- grill overloaded while larder sits lighter
- fryer crushed during peaks because too many safe sellers land there
- breakfast section bottlenecked on eggs and custom modifications
- pastry disconnected from the broader spend strategy
- too much finishing burden concentrated on one section

This is not merely a service issue. It is a design issue.

A business-minded chef reads the menu as section traffic.

They want to know:

- where demand will concentrate
- which section will suffer first
- which dish combinations punish the pass
- which categories need redistributing
- which dishes are not earning the pressure they create

That matters because a menu can look commercially attractive and still behave terribly in service.

## **Revenue structure also starts with the menu**

Revenue is not only about cover count.

It is also about spend structure.

This is where many chefs think too narrowly. They think in terms of dish sales, but not enough in terms of profit contribution and guest journey.

Profit contribution is the actual dollar contribution a dish leaves after direct cost.

That matters because two dishes with the same menu price can contribute very differently.

A \$28 dish with a real direct cost of \$10 contributes very differently from a \$28 dish with a real direct cost of \$14.

One leaves \$18 before labour and overhead pressure.

The other leaves \$14.

That \$4 gap matters over volume.

But contribution is only part of the story.

The other part is customer behaviour.

A business-minded chef's job is not only to create dishes people like. It is to design a menu that encourages a stronger spend journey.

That means encouraging the guest, naturally and appropriately, to move through the meal in a way that benefits both their experience and the business:

- an entrée, maybe shared
- a main
- a side or upgrade
- possibly dessert
- coffee or another closing purchase
- premium add-ons where appropriate

That is not pushy. That is thoughtful menu design.

Let's compare two scenarios.

## **Scenario A**

100 guests per day

Average spend: \$29

6 trading days per week

Weekly revenue: \$17,400

Annual revenue: \$904,800

## **Scenario B**

Same 100 guests

Average spend rises to \$37 because the menu structure better supports:

- shared starters
- premium side adds
- dessert uptake
- coffee after meals
- protein upgrades or paid extras

Weekly revenue: \$22,200

Annual revenue: \$1,154,400

Difference: \$249,600 per year

Same volume.

Same dining room.

Same service pressure.

Different menu structure.

That is why menu engineering is not just about reducing cost. It is also about designing how revenue is generated.

## **Behaviour control**

Customers do not analyse menus the way chefs do.

They respond to them.

They respond to:

- how easy the menu feels to navigate
- whether dishes feel worth the spend
- whether there is a clear progression through the meal
- what appears safe
- what appears premium
- what appears heavy
- what appears balanced
- what seems satisfying

This is where expected value and perceived value become central.

Expected value is formed before the food arrives. It is shaped by:

- price
- description
- category
- venue positioning
- staff recommendation
- what the guest imagines they are about to receive

Perceived value is formed after the experience. It comes from:

- portion size
- ingredient quality
- satisfaction
- visual impact
- menu balance
- how the guest feels after eating
- whether the dish felt worth it

A business-minded chef understands that a dish can be technically correct and still underperform commercially if expected value and perceived value are not aligned.

This is also where menu balance and nutrition begin to matter.

Not in the sense of counting calories for the sake of it.

But in the sense of designing a menu that lets the guest enjoy the experience without feeling punished by it afterward.

If the whole menu is too heavy, too fried, too creamy, too oversized, or too one-dimensional, the guest may spend less, feel worse, and remember the experience less positively.

A business-minded chef cares about that.

They understand that customer wellbeing is part of the commercial equation.

A guest who feels nourished, balanced, and satisfied is more likely to:

- order another course
- have coffee
- come back
- recommend the venue
- trust the menu next time

The menu is shaping all of this.

That is why the business-minded chef sees the menu as the business itself, not just a food list.

**04**

**What a Dish  
Really Costs**

Most chefs underestimate what a dish really costs.

Not because they are careless, but because they were never taught to look deeply enough.

They know invoice cost.

They may know rough portion cost.

But they often do not know the real cost of the dish once reality starts affecting it.

A dish does not cost what it appears to cost.

It costs what it truly consumes.

That includes:

- actual raw input
- yield loss
- trim
- cooking loss
- waste
- portion drift
- accompaniments
- garnish creep
- rework
- inconsistency between chefs

This is where a business-minded chef separates apparent cost from real cost.

That distinction matters.

## **Sirloin vs scotch fillet**

Let's take a steak example because it makes the issue easy to see.

Imagine you are choosing between sirloin and scotch fillet for a main.

### **Sirloin**

Purchase cost: \$24/kg

Portion: 250g raw

Raw protein cost: \$6.00

### **Scotch fillet**

Purchase cost: \$34/kg

Portion: 250g raw

Raw protein cost: \$8.50

At first glance, scotch fillet looks \$2.50 more expensive per portion.

A lot of chefs stop there.

A business-minded chef does not.

They ask:

- What is the guest expectation at each price point?
- Can the higher-value cut support a higher menu price?
- Which cut delivers better perceived value?
- Which creates stronger repeat confidence?
- Which has better operational consistency?
- Which contributes more once the sale price and guest behaviour are included?

Let's say the sirloin is sold at \$34 and the scotch fillet at \$42.

Assume accompaniments and direct supporting cost are roughly \$4.50 on each.

### **Sirloin**

Sell price: \$34

Direct cost: \$10.50

Contribution: \$23.50

### **Scotch fillet**

Sell price: \$42

Direct cost: \$13.00

Contribution: \$29.00

Difference in contribution: \$5.50 per dish

Now suppose the venue sells 45 of these per week through a season.

$$45 \times \$5.50 = \$247.50 \text{ per week}$$

Across a 26-week season:

$$\$247.50 \times 26 = \$6,435 \text{ extra contribution}$$

One decision.

One dish.

One season.

That does not mean scotch fillet is always the right answer. In some venues, the lower menu price and wider accessibility of sirloin may make it commercially stronger. But the lesson is important:

Do not stop at purchase price.

The real question is which option delivers the better business result once contribution, value perception, and guest behaviour are all considered.

## **Yield matters**

If your raw cost assumptions do not reflect edible yield, your costing is already weakened.

If a 250g chicken portion loses more moisture than expected, trims harder than estimated, or plates smaller than the guest expects at that price point, then your cost and value equation both shift.

The same applies to vegetables, fish, and prepared components.

A business-minded chef understands that yield is not a technical side note. It is commercial reality.

## Portion drift is a silent leak

Portion drift quietly destroys contribution.

It often comes from:

- no plating reference
- different chefs plating by feel
- rushed service
- just a little extra
- unclear ownership over consistency

Imagine a side item meant to portion at 150g, but it regularly goes out at 190g.

That is 40g extra.

If the item's true cost is \$8/kg, then 40g costs \$0.32.

Sell 120 per week:

$120 \times \$0.32 = \$38.40$  per week

Across a year:

$\$38.40 \times 52 = \$1,996.80$

From one side item.

Now imagine:

- mash
- chips
- rice
- salad garnish
- aioli
- protein over-portioning

This is why the business-minded chef does not say, “It’s only a bit.”

They understand repetition.

## **Control versus precision**

This point matters.

A business-minded chef does not become obsessed with laboratory precision in a live kitchen. That is unrealistic and often counterproductive.

The goal is not perfect precision.

The goal is control.

Control means:

- recipes are structured
- yields are understood
- plate guides are clear
- portions are reasonably consistent
- menu prices reflect reality
- changes are deliberate, not accidental
- chefs understand contribution, not just cost percentage

For example, a venue may not plate every steak and side with identical mathematical perfection. But if it has:

- a standard mash scoop
- standard vegetable weight
- plating references
- trained section leads
- weekly gross margin review on the dish

then it has control.

That is what wins in the real world.

Precision without control is fragile.

Control without obsession is practical.

A business-minded chef respects the numbers, but also respects operations. They build systems that hold the line over time.

## **Real cost thinking**

To understand what a dish really costs, the business-minded chef asks:

- What is the true edible yield?
- What recurring losses are we ignoring?
- What is the real portion that leaves the pass?
- What hidden extras are creeping in?
- What does this cost do over a week, a month, a season?
- Is the dish still contributing enough after reality is accounted for?

Without that thinking, menu engineering becomes guesswork dressed up as math.

**05**

**Profit Versus  
Popularity**

One of the biggest mistakes in menu thinking is assuming that popularity equals success.

It does not.

A dish can sell very well and still underperform badly for the business.

A dish can sell less often and still be commercially valuable.

That is why menu engineering must look at both popularity and profit contribution together.

Not one without the other.

## The four classic categories

A simplified menu engineering model groups dishes into four categories:

- **Stars:** high popularity, high contribution
- **Plowhorses:** high popularity, low contribution
- **Puzzles:** low popularity, high contribution
- **Dogs:** low popularity, low contribution

These labels matter because they help the chef step away from emotion and evaluate dishes more commercially.

### Stars

These are the dishes doing both jobs well. They sell often and leave strong contribution.

These should usually be protected, highlighted, and monitored carefully.

### Plowhorses

These are popular, but do not contribute enough. They can create the illusion of success while quietly dragging the business.

These often need:

- price review
- tighter portioning
- garnish simplification
- side restructuring
- better add-on paths

## **Puzzles**

These contribute well when sold, but not enough guests choose them.

These may need:

- better menu position
- stronger description
- improved perceived value
- better staff recommendation
- visual or structural adjustment

## **Dogs**

These neither sell well nor contribute well. They take space, attention, prep, and mental energy while giving little back.

These are usually the easiest to remove commercially, but often the hardest emotionally.

A business-minded chef understands that dishes do not stay because of pride. They stay because they earn their place.

## Example

Let's compare four dishes over one week.

### **Dish A: Burger**

Sold: 85

Contribution per dish: \$6

Weekly contribution: \$510

### **Dish B: Fish special**

Sold: 22

Contribution per dish: \$13

Weekly contribution: \$286

### **Dish C: Pasta**

Sold: 70

Contribution per dish: \$4

Weekly contribution: \$280

### **Dish D: Lamb shoulder**

Sold: 14

Contribution per dish: \$11

Weekly contribution: \$154

What matters is not just which dish sold most.

What matters is:

- what each dish leaves behind
- what labour each dish consumes
- what role each dish plays
- what happens if contribution improves slightly

Suppose the pasta contribution can be improved by just \$2 through:

- a slightly better price
- tighter portion control
- one garnish simplification
- one side adjustment

$70 \times \$2 = \$140$  extra per week

$\$140 \times 52 = \$7,280$  per year

From one dish.

Now imagine three or four plowhorses on the menu offering similar opportunity.

That is why contribution matters so much. Teams often focus on what moves, not on what remains.

## **Popularity without contribution is dangerous**

A highly popular dish with poor contribution and heavy labour burden can make the venue feel successful while financially underperforming.

That creates a false sense of health.

The team is busy.

The pass is active.

The dining room looks strong.

But the dollars left behind are weak.

A business-minded chef notices that and refuses to be impressed by movement alone.

They ask:

- What is this dish actually contributing?
- Is it worth the section load?
- Does it create add-on spend?
- Does it improve the mix, or just create pressure?

## The real goal

The goal is not to remove every low-margin item.

The goal is to build a menu where:

- each dish has a role
- the overall structure performs
- contribution is protected
- guest behaviour is guided well
- labour burden is justified

Some dishes bring volume.

Some create margin.

Some anchor quality.

Some support perception.

Some open the door to add-ons.

But none should be accidental.

That is the difference.

**06**

**The Menu  
Framework**

Once dishes are classified, the job is not finished.

That is where many chefs stop too early.

They identify stars, plowhorses, puzzles, and dogs, but do not turn that information into good decisions.

A business-minded chef uses a menu framework to move from observation to action.

They ask:

1. What is this dish doing now?
2. What should this dish be doing?
3. What is stopping it from doing that?
4. What is the best commercial action?
5. What does that action mean over time?

## **Step 1: Understand the role**

A dish may be:

- a traffic driver
- a margin driver
- a premium anchor
- a category balancer
- a brand statement
- an add-on platform

This matters because not every dish should be judged the same way.

A premium steak with modest sales may still be doing useful work if it:

- reinforces quality perception
- anchors nearby pricing
- supports wine or side sales
- strengthens the premium feel of the section

That is different from an underperforming pasta with no meaningful strategic role.

## **Step 2: Diagnose the issue properly**

If a dish is underperforming, why?

Possible reasons include:

- wrong price
- weak description
- poor placement
- poor perceived value
- too much garnish burden
- poor labour efficiency
- weak fit for the venue demographic
- not enough staff confidence recommending it
- too much heaviness in the category
- wrong portion structure
- poor visual impact
- no clear add-on support

A business-minded chef avoids vague conclusions like “guests just don’t want it.”

## Step 3: Choose the action

The real options are usually:

- keep
- raise price
- tighten portion
- simplify garnish
- improve description
- move position
- redesign
- convert to special
- bundle differently
- remove

The right choice depends on the role, contribution, venue style, and operational reality.

## Example: brunch bowl

Imagine a brunch bowl with:

- quinoa
- avocado
- roasted pumpkin
- feta
- poached eggs
- dukkah
- herb dressing
- pickled onion
- micro herbs
- included toast

It looks attractive and sounds healthy. But the real issues might be:

- avocado volatility
- too many touch points
- too much labour
- weak contribution
- no strong upsell path
- too many prep components
- guest sees it as healthy but not high-value enough for the price

A business-minded chef may redesign it by:

- simplifying the grain base
- reducing low-impact components
- keeping one or two hero elements
- making toast an optional add-on
- creating a clear protein upgrade
- cleaning up the description
- keeping the dish balanced and satisfying

Now the dish may:

- cost less
- take less labour
- contribute more
- feel clearer
- create add-on opportunity

Same concept.

Better business.

## **Step 4: Measure over time**

A menu change should not only feel better. It should show effect.

Track:

- weekly sales count
- contribution per dish
- total dish contribution
- add-on rate
- prep burden
- section pressure
- customer response

The framework becomes powerful only when it leads to deliberate action and disciplined review.

That is how a business-minded chef treats the menu: not as a static list, but as a live commercial system.

**07**

**Designing a  
Menu Like an  
Operator**

This is where menu engineering becomes complete.

A lot of people think menu engineering is just:

- costing
- classifying
- price adjusting

That is only part of it.

A business-minded chef designs a menu like an operator.

That means they consider everything that affects performance, not just food cost percentage.

## **Seasonality**

Seasonality is not just a culinary idea. It is a commercial advantage.

When ingredients are in season, you often gain:

- better quality
- better availability
- better pricing

That is powerful.

An out-of-season tomato may cost more, taste worse, and deliver poor value.

An in-season tomato may cost less, taste better, and justify stronger confidence in the dish.

A business-minded chef works with those rhythms where possible.

They ask:

- which products are entering their best window?
- which are likely to rise in price?
- which ingredients can support a seasonal promotional edge?
- which menu categories can benefit from seasonal stability?

## **Supplier strategy**

Suppliers are not just order takers. They are part of the operating system.

A business-minded chef builds supplier relationships with intent.

They understand:

- consistency matters
- price stability matters
- commitment can improve negotiation
- seasonal deals can protect contribution
- cheap supply is not always smart supply

If a venue can lock a useful seasonal price on a high-volume ingredient, that can make forecasting and menu stability much stronger.

This matters especially for hero dishes.

## Labour strategy integrated

The menu must fit:

- the wage budget
- the available skill mix
- the section structure
- the venue's training capacity
- the peak service periods

A business-minded chef uses senior chefs where their skill has the highest return and designs enough structure that juniors and apprentices can contribute productively without damaging quality.

That means thinking in labour productivity, not just headcount.

They ask:

- what can be batch prepped safely?
- what truly needs a senior hand?
- what can be delegated?
- what becomes a bottleneck?
- what is punishing one section too heavily?
- does the dish earn the labour it consumes?

## **Nutrition as strategy**

This is one of the most misunderstood parts of menu design.

This is not about turning chefs into nutritionists.

It is not about calorie obsession.

It is not about removing indulgence.

It is about understanding that menu balance influences:

- what guests order
- how much they spend
- whether they feel comfortable ordering multiple courses
- how they feel afterward
- whether they trust the venue again

A business-minded chef considers:

- lighter and richer balance
- vegetable presence
- protein diversity
- carb load across the menu
- dietary variety
- whether the guest can enjoy a full meal without feeling wrecked afterward

If every course is too heavy, too rich, too fried, or too oversized, the menu may reduce spend and weaken repeat desire.

A better-balanced menu can encourage:

- a lighter shared opener
- a satisfying main
- enough comfort to still choose dessert or coffee

This matters commercially.

It also matters experientially.

The guest remembers how the meal made them feel.

If it felt balanced, satisfying, and nourishing, that becomes part of value.

If it felt excessive, greasy, or physically unpleasant, that becomes part of value too.

The wellbeing of the customer is part of menu engineering.

## **Expected value versus perceived value**

This is one of the most important ideas in the whole book.

Expected value is formed before the first bite.

It comes from:

- the price
- the language
- the category
- the venue positioning
- the comparison to other items on the menu

Perceived value is formed after delivery.

It comes from:

- the look of the dish
- satisfaction
- portion appropriateness
- flavour delivery
- ingredient quality
- balance
- whether the guest felt it was worth it

A dish can be technically good and still fail commercially if expected value is high but perceived value lands low.

Example:

A \$29 prawn linguine described with premium language suggests generosity and strong seafood value.

If it arrives with limited prawn presence, too much pasta, oily finish, and low visual impact, perceived value drops below expected value.

Now compare a \$25 chicken dish delivered with:

- attractive presentation
- proper portion
- balanced vegetables
- satisfying structure
- clear care in execution

Expected value may have been moderate, but perceived value lands high.

That guest feels the dish was worth it.

A business-minded chef does not just cost out dishes. They design value delivery.

## **Designing the full journey**

When all of this comes together, the menu stops being a list and becomes an experience structure.

The business-minded chef designs:

- how the meal opens
- what anchors the mains
- what encourages a side
- what leaves room for dessert
- what supports coffee
- what helps the customer feel good
- what protects contribution
- what the team can execute well
- what the season and supplier network can support

08

# Fixing Your Menu

Fixing a menu usually does not mean rebuilding everything.

More often, the best results come from a handful of intelligent corrections.

A business-minded chef does not redesign for drama. They redesign for effect.

## **Example**

Imagine a venue with three clear issues:

1. A signature burger sells heavily but contributes weakly
2. A premium fish dish contributes well but rarely gets ordered
3. A popular pasta slows service and leaves too little margin

Let's fix them properly.

### **The burger**

Problems:

- strong volume
- weak contribution
- fries automatically included
- too many garnish elements
- little premium add-on path

Possible fixes:

- simplify garnish
- review bun or cheese spec
- tighten patty consistency
- offer bacon, fried egg, extra cheese as paid upgrades
- review whether fries should always be included
- simplify one low-impact cost element

Result:

- better contribution
- more upgrade behaviour
- less waste
- guest still feels choice

## **The fish dish**

Problems:

- strong contribution
- low popularity
- poor description
- weak menu placement
- staff not recommending it confidently

Possible fixes:

- rewrite around flavour and quality
- move higher in the section
- pair with a seasonal side or wine note
- improve plating presence if needed
- train staff on how to describe it

Result:

stronger order rate without sacrificing contribution

## **The pasta**

Problems:

- high popularity
- low contribution
- garnish-heavy
- labour-heavy during service
- section slowdown

Possible fixes:

- simplify finish
- tighten garnish
- review portion or menu price
- create strong paid add-ons
- remove one expensive low-value element

Result:

- better contribution
- less section pain
- improved sales mix

## **The principle**

Fixing menus is not about random change.

It is about identifying which changes produce the best combined effect on:

- contribution
- labour
- customer behaviour
- section flow
- perceived value

A business-minded chef asks:

- What can be improved?
- What can be repositioned?
- What can be simplified?
- What can be made to earn its place?

That is where real menu improvement happens.

09

**Positioning  
Your Menu**

Positioning means shaping how the menu is understood and chosen.

It is about context.

The same dish can perform very differently depending on:

- where it sits
- how it is priced relative to surrounding dishes
- how it is described
- what section it belongs to
- what it is compared against

A business-minded chef understands that customers rarely judge dishes in isolation. They judge comparatively.

## **Anchor price**

Anchor price is a reference point that changes how surrounding prices feel.

For example, if a mains section includes:

- \$24
- \$26
- \$28
- \$42

that \$42 dish can make the \$28 dish feel more reasonable.

Without the premium anchor, the \$28 dish might feel expensive to some guests.

This is not trickery. It is just how comparison works.

A premium anchor can:

- support pricing confidence
- make mid-tier items feel safer
- reinforce venue quality
- create aspiration

## **Why positioning affects orders**

Guests want to reduce decision discomfort.

They want:

- something that feels worth it
- something that feels appropriate
- something that feels safe enough to commit to

Good positioning helps them do that.

This can come from:

- clearer category structure
- stronger dish descriptions
- balanced pricing ladders
- better order of presentation
- visual logic

## **Positioning shapes expected value**

If a dish is described in premium language and sits at the top end of price, expected value rises.

If delivery does not match, perceived value collapses.

That is why positioning and execution must agree.

The menu makes a promise before the food gets a chance to fulfil it.

## **Positioning supports spend growth**

Positioning also helps drive a better spend journey.

Examples:

- shared starters placed first can open the table
- premium sides placed near mains can encourage pairing
- desserts described as light or elegant may remain attractive even after a substantial meal
- coffee positioned as part of the end-of-meal ritual can increase close-out spend

This is not manipulation.

It is thoughtful guidance.

A business-minded chef uses positioning to help the guest choose more comfortably, and in a way that supports a stronger overall result.

10

**The Chef's  
Advantage**

This knowledge changes a chef.

Not because it makes them less creative.

Not because it turns them into an accountant.

Not because it removes the craft.

It changes them because it adds another layer of vision.

They stop seeing plates only as plates.

They start seeing systems.

They start seeing contribution.

They start seeing labour pressure before it appears.

They start seeing where value is lost and where it can be protected.

They start seeing what the guest is likely to do before the order even arrives.

That is an advantage.

A chef who can cook well is valuable.

A chef who can cook well and think commercially is far more valuable.

Because that chef can:

- design better menus
- speak more intelligently with owners and managers
- understand the pressure behind the numbers
- make stronger daily decisions
- contribute beyond the pass
- progress faster toward leadership and trust

This is where the phrase business-minded chef becomes real.

It is not a slogan.

It is a standard.

A business-minded chef does not wait to be told food cost is high. They can already see which menu decisions might be causing it.

They do not wait for management to complain about labour. They can already see which dishes are punishing productivity.

They do not assume that full tables equal success. They ask what the menu is actually contributing.

They do not hide behind creativity when a dish underperforms. They refine it, reposition it, or remove it.

That is rare.

And because it is rare, it creates career advantage.

It leads to:

- stronger trust
- more responsibility
- better conversations with operators
- better opportunities
- more influence
- a stronger long-term career position

11

# What To Do Next

If this book has done its job properly, you will not look at menus the same way again.

That is the point.

You were never meant to read this and simply find it interesting.

You were meant to start noticing things:

- dishes that look strong but contribute weakly
- menus that create too much labour
- categories that block add-on spend
- poor balance across courses
- pricing that creates the wrong expectation
- dishes that should be stars but are hidden like puzzles
- guest behaviour shaped by structure, not luck

Now the next step is not more theory.

It is application.

Start with one menu.

Your venue's menu, if possible.

And review it with discipline:

- classify the dishes
- estimate real contribution
- assess popularity
- review labour burden
- review section balance
- identify ingredient overlap
- compare expected value with perceived value
- identify where spend per guest is being lost
- assess whether the menu encourages a complete experience
- assess whether the guest is likely to feel satisfied, nourished, and well-guided through the meal

Then choose a small number of deliberate improvements.

Not twenty.

Two or three.

That is enough to begin.

Because menu engineering is not about making clever observations.

It is about making better decisions.

And that is where the deeper work begins.

This book has given you the lens.

The next level is learning how to apply that lens properly:

- with real menu analysis
- with stronger commercial thinking
- with practical frameworks
- with guided examples
- with deeper decision-making tools

That is exactly what the next step is for.

If this book helped you see the menu more clearly, the full module is designed to help you work on it properly.

Not just to understand menu engineering.

But to apply it like a business-minded chef.

That is the difference between reading about the system and learning how to use it with confidence.

And in hospitality, confidence built on proper understanding is worth a great deal.

Because one better menu decision, made early and repeated consistently, can change the performance of a kitchen for months.

Sometimes for years.

So do not leave this as inspiration.

Use it.

Review a menu.

Classify the dishes.

Question the labour.

Question the spend journey.

Question the value delivery.

Question what each dish is really doing.

Then go deeper.

That is where the real transformation is.