2395 The Focused Menu

Product Book · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/2395-the-focused-menu/

Look at your menu right now. Is it a curated collection of dishes you execute at the highest level, or is it a hedge — a long list designed to avoid losing anyone rather than to compel someone specific?

A menu that tries to be everything to everyone is a menu that stands for nothing. Your Guest sees it immediately. They flip through six pages of options and nothing stands out. Nothing compels them. Nothing makes them feel like they've discovered something. They order something safe, eat something fine, and leave with nothing to talk about.

A focused menu — one that reflects a clear point of view, a specific culinary identity, and a deliberate choice about who you're serving — does the opposite. It tells the Guest: we know exactly who we are, and this is what we do better than anyone else.

The menu engineering matrix gives you the analytical tool. Stars, Plow Horses, Puzzles, Dogs — demand and margin plotted against each other. Most operators have never run this analysis. They add items based on what they think Guests want, remove items based on what they don't like cooking, and never look at the actual data. That's not menu management. That's guessing.

But the matrix is a diagnostic, not a strategy. The strategy is the point of view behind the menu — the clarity about who this restaurant is for and what it does better than anyone else in the market. The matrix tells you which items to cut and which to feature. The point of view tells you why the menu exists at all.

The Why Filter Before the Spreadsheet

Before the cost analysis. Before the conflict audit. Before the Stars and Dogs matrix. Ask why the item exists at all. An item that cannot answer that question doesn't deserve the engineering conversation. The why filter is the positioning filter applied to the menu — if the item doesn't serve what your operation stands for, its food cost percentage is irrelevant. You are not in the business of keeping every item that earns its margin. You are in the business of building a menu that tells a coherent story. Items that don't serve the story are noise, regardless of how they

perform on a spreadsheet.

The Why Audit as a Named Diagnostic

Three questions before the spreadsheet opens. Why does this item exist? What does it say about what we believe? If our best Guest ordered it ten years from now, would we be proud to still serve it? Items that can't survive all three questions are on the menu by inertia, not by design. Most menus carry 20 to 30 percent of items that exist because nobody had the removal conversation. The why audit is that conversation — structured, repeatable, and faster than any cost analysis at identifying what doesn't belong.

The Menu Description Does Work

"Grilled Salmon" and "Wild-Caught Alaskan King Salmon, Seared in Herb-Infused Olive Oil" are the same fish. The second one earns the price. The difference is not the ingredient — it is the story the operator chose to tell about it. Most operators write menu descriptions as inventory lists: what the dish contains, in the shortest possible words, with the price at the end. That format puts the Guest in a calculation mode. They are reading specs and comparing numbers. The operator who writes descriptions as craft narratives — origin, technique, specificity, care — shifts the Guest from calculation to anticipation. They are reading about an experience, not evaluating a transaction. The description is free. What it produces is not.

Cost Substitution vs. Identity Substitution

When commodity costs shift, a menu built on why tells you what a substitute needs to deliver — the flavor profile, the experience, the story. A menu built on cost tells you to find something cheaper. That is the functional difference between a menu built on identity and a menu built on a spreadsheet. The cost menu finds a substitute. The identity menu finds the right substitute. One replaces an ingredient. The other protects what the Guest came for.

A focused menu isn't smaller for the sake of being smaller. It's smaller because every item on it earned its place — and every item on it reinforces the same story about who you are.

The operational case is just as strong as the strategic one. A focused menu means better sourcing — fewer items, higher volume per item, more leverage with your vendors and better ingredient quality. It means faster service — your kitchen isn't juggling forty different plates at once. It means less waste — tighter inventory, higher turnover on every item you carry. It means simpler

training — your cooks and servers can actually master the menu instead of memorizing a phone book.

The data confirms what operators who have done this work already know. Over a five-year period, chains that reduced menu items averaged 3.3% same-store sales growth annually. Chains that didn't averaged 1.9%. That 1.4-point annual difference compounds to a 75% cumulative gap — 14% growth versus 8% — over the same window. The focused menu is not a sacrifice. It is a competitive position.

I've seen operators with sixty-item menus baffled by high food costs and inconsistent quality. The math isn't complicated. Sixty items means sixty ingredient lists, sixty prep procedures, sixty points of potential failure. Cut it in half and you will immediately see improvements in execution, waste, ticket times, and Guest satisfaction.

The best restaurants in the world do not have large menus. They have tight, curated, intentional offerings. Your menu should be a greatest-hits album, not a box set of every demo tape you ever recorded.