2415 Categorization and Menu Layout

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Your menu has real estate. Some of it is prime. Some of it is invisible. And the items you place where determine what your Guests buy — before they've read a single word.

The Golden Triangle is the most studied pattern in menu design: Guests' eyes move first to the center of the center panel, then to the top right, then to the top left. That is your prime real estate. Your highest-margin, most distinctive signature items belong there — not your most popular items, not your cheapest items, your highest-margin items. The ones that earn you the most when they sell.

The four categories from the menu engineering matrix determine placement strategy.

Stars — high demand, high margin — earn the prime real estate. Feature them. Give them visual prominence. Tell their story. Never let them drift to the back page or the bottom of a column.

Puzzles — low demand, high margin — earn a second look before you bury them. These items make real money when they sell. The problem is almost never the item itself. It's where it lives and how it's described. Reposition them, rename them, have your cast recommend them. Sometimes the only thing standing between a Puzzle and a Star is the right table conversation.

Plow Horses — high demand, low margin — require surgery, not removal. These are the items your Guests love and your margins hate. Re-engineer the recipe. Adjust the portion. Reprice with a story that supports the increase. A Plow Horse you leave untouched is a margin leak that runs every shift.

Dogs — low demand, low margin — have no argument for staying. Cut them. The space they occupy on your menu, in your walk-in, and in your cast's memory belongs to something better.

Beyond the matrix, two principles govern layout. First: fewer items sell better than more. The cognitive load of a twelve-page menu produces decision paralysis, not satisfaction. A focused menu signals confidence — "we know what we do, and this is it." Second: design for appetite, not inventory. The menu is not a catalog of everything you can make. It is a curated invitation to a specific experience.

Two more techniques worth adopting: remove dollar signs from your menu entirely. Research shows the dollar sign triggers a psychological pain response associated with spending — removing it shifts the Guest's attention from cost to value. And embed your prices at the end of the item description in the same font, rather than right-justifying them in a separate column. Right-justified prices invite price comparison. Nested prices invite reading. You want Guests reading your descriptions, not scanning your price column.