

Make the Most of Your Menu - Menu design TOAST POS

Here's a primer on the six most common psychology principles used in menu design.

1. The Paradox of Choice

“I think some of the largest gains that restaurants have made with menu engineering is realizing they have **too many items on the menu**,” said Michael Kasanava.

He cited the **80/20 rule**: often, 80% of a restaurant's sales come from 20% of its items. That means you should take the time to figure out where the excess is, and what menu items are bogging you down.

According to George A. Miller, a cognitive psychology expert, [most guests may only remember seven pieces of information](#) (plus or minus two) at a given time. When looking at a restaurant's menu, guests often have too many choices to process. This is called the paradox of choice. We think that with more choices, we'll be able to make a better decision, but the reality is we end up getting bogged down.

Make it easier for guests to scan your menu by offering around seven options per food category.

To combat the paradox of choice, menus typically categorize similar items together: a category for pizzas, a category for appetizers, a category for salads, and so on. This helps guests remember the highlights of each list.

It's also true that having an excessive number of menu items can hurt sales: When it takes longer for guests to place their orders, it slows down the table turn time, or the time it takes to get guests through the line. The result is that you end up serving fewer guests during each shift.

Here's a restaurant that does a great job combating the paradox of choice: [REYLA in Asbury Park, NJ](#). They have a beautifully curated menu, with only five or six choices per section.

They also choose to omit the dollar signs in their prices — more on that in the next section.

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we believe sharing food turns friends into family

<p>BITES</p>	
<p>VEG PLATTER 9 chef's daily pickled vegetables</p> <p>HUMMUS <i>served with pita or gluten-free man'oushe</i> HOUSE arbequina, nigella 7 FUL stewed fava, calabrian chili, lemon, herbs 9</p> <p>LENTIL SOUP 5 ginger, apple, coconut milk, mint labne</p> <p>OUR GREEK 15 raclette, mozzarella, olives, yellow zhoug, tomato granita</p> <p>PUMPKIN 13 arugula, pecans, halloumi, lemongrass vinaigrette</p>	
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">ALL IN</p> <p>REYLA'S DOZEN 175 all twelve garden, farm & sea shared plates</p>	<p>SIDES</p> <p>BATATA 6 fried kennebec, sweet & sour harissa</p> <p>GREEN BANGERS 8 curry yoghurt, pickled apricot, chickpea</p> <p>FREGOLA 9 avocado, egg, pistachio, confit garlic</p> <p>FENNEL 6 english peas, braised tomatoes, cucumber aquafaba</p> <p>MAC & CHEESE 10 chevre, smoked gouda, sweet potato</p>
<p>GARDEN</p>	<p>FARM & SEA</p>
<p>GREEN FALAFEL 9 hummus, blood orange, mint salad</p> <p>BRUSSELS 12 tahin, chakalaka spice, lemon, bonito</p> <p>DOLMAS 14 cabbage, persian rice, raisins, sunchoke, cherry zhoug</p> <p>ESCAROLE 10 flageolets, okra, sofrito, butternut, chermoula</p> <p>MOUSSAKA 13 roasted eggplant, duxelles, potato, béchamel</p> <p>ASHAK 12 mushroom, charred scallion, aquafaba</p>	<p>PORK 18 harissa, caponata, orange blossom, black garlic labne</p> <p>DUCK 17 crimson lentil purée, cantaloupe, pickled celery</p> <p>FISH 19 moroccan stew, dukkah, pickled onions</p> <p>STEAK 26 NY strip, urfa biber</p> <p>LAMB 23 fig BBQ, moroccan mac & cheese</p> <p>CHICKEN 19 braised leeks, mint, kobucha, blackened apples</p>

2. Dollar Signs, Decimal Points and Their Semantic Salience

Semantics = the relationship between signs and symbols and their meanings.

Salience = the relative prominence of something in a given situation.

Semantic Salience = how noticeable (and potentially important) a symbol's meaning is to a situation or a decision-making process.

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In menu design, this applies to pricing. It's not about what the menu items actually cost, but rather how they're presented to the guest. Consider how symbols affect your menu price presentation.

Here are a few ways to think about displaying prices:

\$14.00 / \$14 / 14.00 / \$13.99 / 14 / 13.95 / fourteen dollars

All these ways of writing out a price have different connotations.

The Dollar Sign Question

Logically, a dollar sign tends to be associated with having to pay, and having to pay tends to be associated with losing money, which never really feels like a good thing.

Your guests know that the number next to the menu item means price — it's not necessary to include a dollar sign. Plus, it just adds visual clutter.

Round Numbers or Decimal Points?

There's a few things to consider here. First, **prices ending in .00** can come across as somewhat pretentious, so unless you're going for a very classic fine dining vibe, it's best to avoid this way of writing out prices.

You might think it's better to lower your price to **13.99** because it seems one dollar lower, but doing so actually **cheapens the perceived value** your food. **Prices ending in .99** do great in stores when selling clothes or produce, but there's no need for it on most menus. The exception here is if your big selling point is how incredibly affordable your food is, like in most fast-food restaurants. For example, a cheeseburger can be \$4.99, but a dish of peking duck for two should be written out as \$42 or 42, depending on your preference — but never \$41.99.

Interestingly enough, **prices ending in .95** can portray friendliness and familiarity, so if that's the vibe you're going for with your restaurant, you can test it out and see if it changes anything.

What about writing out prices in words?

Writing out the price in words, as in "**fourteen dollars**" or "**fourteen**," generally comes across as stuffy, so just like prices ending in .00, most restaurants should avoid this way of writing out prices.

[REYLA, in Asbury Park, NJ](#), shown above, goes without the dollar signs and without any decimal points, which matches with their simple and clean menu.

When in doubt, leave out the decimal points and dollar signs.

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3. Eye Movement Patterns

Eye movement patterns are a tricky science.

Most restaurant experts say that people's eyes will immediately go to the top of the page or the top right hand corner. Others rely on the Golden Triangle, which says the eye goes to the middle, then the top right, and then the top left.

However, [according to a Korean research study in the Journal of Global Business and Technology](#), a third of your diners are more likely to order the first item they see on the page. And this [San Francisco State study](#), using scanners and video cameras, revealed that guests read menus like a book, starting at the top-left.

The menu at [Alimentari & Vineria Il Buco, in New York City](#) covers all these bases and puts their Star menu items in the top right corner, the top left corner, and in the center.

IL BUCO PRANZO

ANTIPASTI

- 17 Crispy Artichokes**
preserved lemon
- 18 Housemade Ricotta**
*poached local garlic
grilled stirato*
- 18 Insalata**
*mixed bitter greens
fennel, apple, goat cheese
apple cider vinegar*
- 17 Salt Roasted Baby Beets**
*yogurt, beet chimichurri
urfa biber chili, chive*
- 21 Hamachi Crudo**
*yuzu, pickled peppers, nori
spirulina, shrimp chips*
- 19 Riso Nero**
*wild shrimp, farm egg
venetian black rice
calabrian sausage*
- 23 Pizza Umbra**
*lonza, tomatoes, mozzarella
arugula, calabrian chili*

PANE, OLIO, SALE

House-Baked Bread - \$2 per person
Trapanese fiore di sale, il Buco extra virgin olive oil

2019 Harvest Olive Oil Tasting - \$14
Biancolilla (Sicilia), Cerasuola (Sicilia), Moraiolo (Umbria)

SALUMI DELLA CASA

- 20 Selezione for 2** **30 Selezione for 4** **38 Assortito**
House-cured heritage breed pork
- | | | |
|----------------|---------------|------------------|
| 9 Cacciatorini | 14 Prosciutto | 10 Guanciale |
| 9 Finocchiona | 14 Culatello | 9 Pancetta |
| 9 Toscano | 9 Lardo | 14 Coppa |
| 9 Piccante | 9 Mortadella | 9 Coppa di Testa |
| 14 Bresaola | 9 Rosa | 14 Lonza |

PRIMI

- 28 Taglierini Neri**
*moosabec mussels
piquillo peppers, lemon*
- 26 Risotto**
*roasted field mushrooms
sunflower seeds, oregano
parmigiano*
- 23 Bucatini Cacio e Pepe**
*pecorino romano
black pepper (setaro)*
- 22 Lasagnette**
*housemade sausage, lacinato
kale, parmigiano (housemade)*
- 19 Spaghettoni**
*tuna, capers, calabrian
chili, fennel pollen (setaro)*

SECONDI

- 19 Short Rib Panino**
*gorgonzola butter, onion
marmalade*
- 18 Porchetta Panino**
arugula, salsa verde
- 17 Crispy Cod Panino**
*pickled vegetables
cucumber, caper aioli*
- 34 Hemlock Farms Chicken**
*crispy potatoes, garlic,
almond-hazelnut romesco*
- 31 Seared Scottish Salmon**
*fire-roasted cauliflower
lemon tahini, sunflower
shoots, aleppo pepper*
- 42 Whole Baked Branzino**
*sicilian salt crusted
rosemary, lemon, olive oil*

CONTORNI

- 12 Seasonal Greens**
anchovy butter
- 12 Polenta Fritta**
crispy polenta, parmigiano

LA FILOSOFIA

An offspring of il Buco on Bond Street, the Alimentari continues with the same commitment to sustainable living. Our salumi is prepared in house with pigs raised hormone and antibiotic free. The bread is baked on the premises with organic whole grains and long fermentation. All of our wood furnishings have been constructed with the joists of recuperated wood from the original Great Jones Lumber Supply.

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4. Curtail Menu Competition

Michael Kasavana advises that you don't confuse your guests with similar menu items in one category. "Restaurateurs need to consider that items compete against each other in the same menu classification," he told us.

He explained that people don't realize that having two different steak options will compete against each other, instead of driving up profit or giving off the illusion of abundance. It's best to develop one fantastic steak dish to remove the competition.

[Evolution Cuisine in San Antonio, TX](#), does a great job with this. Every dish on their menu is unique, and no item is stepping on the toes of another.



The image shows a menu for a restaurant named 'Evos'. The menu is organized into three main sections: ENTRADAS, SOPAS Y ARROCES, and PLATOS FUERTES. Each section is separated by a horizontal line. The items are listed with their ingredients and prices.

Section	Item	Price
ENTRADAS	Pulpo Al Pastor + Piña Relish Al Pastor Octopus	17
	Esquites Estilo DF con Espuma de Mayonesa Caliente Corn Kernels	14
	Ensalada Yeca con Filete de Res y Clorofila + Guacamole Salt Cured Beef	15
	Canutillo de Cangrejo + Aguacate y Pesto de Cilantro Crab Cannoli	16
SOPAS Y ARROCES	Oro Negro Crema de Frijol + Esfera de Queso Oaxaca Black Bean Velouté	13
	Arroz Quemado con Mariscos Seafood Charred Rice	15
	Sopa de Tortilla Tortilla Soup	13
	Chilpachole Veracruzano y Raviol de Jaiba Seafood Velouté + Crab Ravioli	15
	Fideos Secos Enchipotlados + Frijol Fideo + Beans	12
PLATOS FUERTES	Pesca del Día + Mole Verde y Galleta de Papa Fish of the Day	33
	Deshebrada De Res + Puré De Coliflor Shredded Beef	32
	Magret De Pato y Mole Negro Duck Magret + Black Mole	35
	Tenderloin + Adobo Yucateco y Puré De Camote Beef Tenderloin Yucatan	37
	Cordero + Adobo Yucateco y Plátano Especiado Lamb Yucatan	35

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5. Use the Full Power of Words

The names and descriptions of the dishes on the menu are what diners tend to base their ordering decisions on, so you better be precise and captivating with your menu descriptions. Showing the details and craftsmanship of how a dish is prepared will help diners appreciate it more.

A [field experiment conducted by Dr. Brian Wansink](#) at Cornell University found that not only do **descriptive menu labels increase sales of an item by 27%**, but they also result in customers feeling more satisfied with their meal. This also led to more favorable comments — assuming that the item lived up to expectations.

When they compared dishes labeled with sensory descriptors like "tender," "succulent," and "satin"; cultural or geographic terms like "Cajun" and "Italian"; and nostalgic terms like "homestyle," "traditional," and "Grandma's," versus the same meals without those descriptors, the items with descriptive labels sold 27% more.

Note: Unless your chef was once a professional copywriter, they shouldn't be the only one writing menu descriptions. Instead, let a copywriter or publicist lead the project, with the chef and managers giving their guidance and feedback.

[SuMiao Hunan Kitchen in Cambridge, MA](#) does an amazing job with descriptions. Here's one section of their menu, featuring phrases like "daily catch tilapia", "thirteen spices," "wok-tossed" — these are great descriptors that show the quality and care that go into each menu item. This menu has a great balance of being descriptive without being heavy-handed or using language that's off-puttingly flowery.

LAVA FISH 剁椒蒸鱼片 swai filet, duo jiao, seasoned soy sauce	24	PAN-SEARED EGG TOFU 香煎虾仁玉子豆腐 japanese egg tofu, shrimp, pea, carrot	18	BOSTON	DUNGENESS
DUCK YOLK BREADED CRISPY SHRIMP 咸蛋黄焗虾仁 salted duck yolk, peeled shrimp	28	KUNG PAO SHRIMP 宫保虾仁 onion, peanut, green & red pepper, dried chili	20	LOBSTER	CRAB
PAN-SEARED YELLOW CROAKER 香煎小黄鱼 ginger, garlic, long hot pepper, seasoned black soybean sauce	18	HOMETOWN SAUTÉED EEL POT 家乡鳝鱼煲 fresh water eel, cucumber, mustard green, chives, garlic, green pepper, chili bean paste	36	预定龙虾 [PRE-ORDER]	珍宝蟹 [PRE-ORDER]
YELLOW RIVER FISH 金汤酸菜鱼片 swai filet, white beech mushroom, pickled cabbage, green & banana pepper	26	STEAMED WHOLE TILAPIA 剁椒/姜葱蒸全鱼 daily catch tilapia, your choice of topping of duojiao (spicy) or ginger-scallion only (non spicy)	36	SPICY TWIN MP LOBSTERS 香辣双龙 wok tossed with garlic, ginger, red pepper, chili sauce, thirteen spices, butter	SPICY FRESH MP CRAB 香辣珍宝蟹 wok tossed with garlic, ginger, red pepper, chili sauce, thirteen spices, butter
				GINGER & MP SCALLION TWIN LOBSTERS 姜葱双龙 wok tossed with ginger, scallion, garlic, butter	FRESH CRAB MP WITH CRISPY GARLIC & CHILI 风沙珍宝蟹 breadcrumbs, scallion, chili pepper fermented black soybean salt pepper & soy sauce

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6. Social Proof

Social proof is the theory that people will adopt the beliefs or actions of a group of people they like or trust. It's the “I'll have what they're having” effect.

This is an easy win on your menu — for items you really want to highlight, include a quote from a customer, a family member, or even the chef. Or simply create a “Staff Favorites” section and call out a few of your most delicious and profitable items