

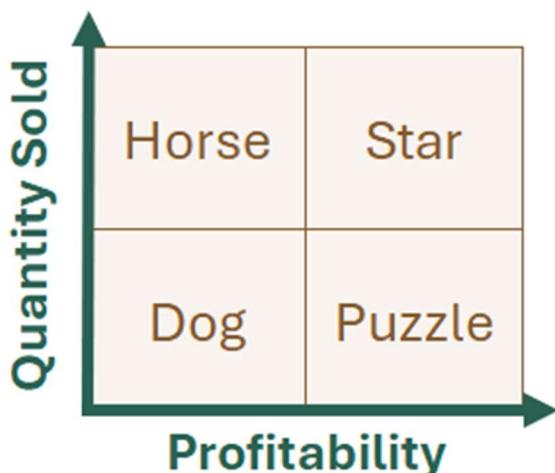
Menu Engineering

Most customers decide what to order in under two minutes. That brief window means they are not reading the whole menu and are not paying attention to each dish equally. Menu engineering takes advantage of the way the eye naturally moves across the page, using factors like layout, visual cues and item descriptions to focus customer attention to items that are appealing and profitable. When applied effectively, it can improve profitability by 15% or more.

Product Mix

Before you can guide customer attention, you need to know which items support your goals. That means identifying your top earners, your customer favorites, and the dishes that may need to be reworked or removed.

The Menu Engineering Matrix (below) helps you sort dishes into four categories based on profitability and popularity. It's a practical way to see what's working, what's underperforming, and how to balance margin with guest appeal.



Stars: High popularity, high profit. Stars are your strongest items. They sell well and help margins.

Plow-horses: High popularity, low profit. Horses are customer favorites but are not very profitable.

Puzzles: Low popularity, high profit. Puzzles have strong margins but don't get ordered often.

Dogs: Low popularity, low profit. Dogs are your weakest items. They don't sell well and don't help your bottom line either.

Putting it into action:

- **Stars:** These are already successful. These are great menu items to highlight on your menu.
- **Plow-Horses:** Look for ways to adjust item cost (ingredients, portion size) or menu price to improve profitability. They already sell well and don't need to be highlighted.

- **Puzzles:** Examine why these don't get ordered. Tweak ingredients, pricing, description or consider removing from the menu. These may be highlighted if paired with meaningful adjustments.
- **Dogs:** These are good candidates to swap for more profitable and popular dishes. These are not good items to highlight.

Layout

Menu format is usually determined by menu length. Once you select the format that best fits your offering, you can prioritize how dishes appear on the page or across multiple pages. Each format guides the eye differently, pulling focus to certain sections while others attract less attention.

The chart below illustrates how common menu formats guide the eye, highlighting where visibility is strongest and where it tends to decline.

Menu Format	Most Attention	Least Attention
Single page	Top of the page	Bottom of the page
Two-panel (single fold)	Top of the right panel	Bottom left panel
Three-panel (envelope fold)	Top of the far right panel	Bottom of the far left panel
Multi-page booklet	Top of each page	Bottom of each page

Several psychological effects influence how customers read and remember menu items, which is why placement and formatting are key elements of menu design.

Primacy Effect

People tend to pay the most attention to and remember the first items they see.

Recency Effect

People also tend to notice and remember the last items they see.

Price Columns

Listing prices in a column draws attention to cost and encourages price-based decisions.

Putting it into action:

- **Identify Format:** Determine whether you're working with a single page, tri-fold, or booklet style menu.
- **Prioritize Placement:** Position profitable items where they will get the most attention based on menu layout and list position.
- **Keep It Short:** Limit categories to 5–7 items to support easier decision-making. Longer lists create a middle section that customers tend to skim past.
- **Avoid Price Columns:** Integrate prices within descriptions to reduce purely price-driven choices.

Visual Cues

Design elements such as boxes, icons, shading, or typography draw the eye to specific parts of the menu. These cues are a great way to highlight your high-margin items and improve menu readability. To be effective, they should be used sparingly to avoid clutter or crowding.

Eye Magnets

Visual emphasis (color, bold text, boxes, images) draw attention to specific items.

Negative Space

Leaving extra space around an item makes it more noticeable and easier for the eye to focus.

Putting it into action:

- **Use Eye Magnets:** Draw attention to key items with color, bold text or boxes.
- **Be Selective:** Limit highlighted items to make sure your cues are effective.
- **Create Negative Space:** Leave space around priority items to make them stand out.
- **Find Balance:** Make sure eye magnets and negative space are distributed across the menu. No section should feel crowded or ignored.

Language

The words used on your menu shape how guests order and how they feel about what they ordered. Research shows that diners are 27% more likely to choose items with descriptive language, and they tend to rate those dishes as higher quality and better value.

Titles and descriptions should be specific and purposeful. They should highlight what makes a dish worth choosing: a specific ingredient, a cooking method, a sense of familiarity or tradition. “Slow-cooked short ribs” tells a different story than “short ribs.” “Homestyle Mac ‘n’ Cheese” invites a different feeling than “Macaroni and Cheese.”

Small shifts in language help set expectations and reflect the care behind your food. They also shape how guests perceive quality and value and that perception influences how you can price the menu.

Putting it into action:

- **Showcase Ingredients:** Use specific terms that highlight quality or sourcing. “Heirloom tomatoes” or “fresh caught” give guests more to connect with.
- **Highlight Cooking Methods:** Describe techniques that signal care and effort. “Slow-roasted,” or “house-made” add context and value.
- **Create Nostalgia:** Use familiar references that evoke comfort or memory. Phrases like “Sunday Supper,” or “Family Recipe” can tap into emotional connection.
- **Demonstrate Value:** Help guests picture what goes into a dish. Understanding portion size, sourcing, or preparation helps guests see the value and feel good about the price.

Bringing it Together

Menu engineering guides the guest experience through visual storytelling, shaping how choices are made. It directs attention to dishes that delight customers while supporting your business goals. When product mix, layout, visual cues, and language work together, the menu becomes both clear and compelling. The result is stronger profitability, a better guest experience, and a menu that reflects the care behind your food.

Resource List

RestoHub. (n.d.). *Restaurant menu engineering: Increasing profits.*

<https://www.restohub.org/gb/operations/menu/restaurant-menu-engineering/>

RestoHub. (n.d.). *Restaurant menu design, menu layout & menu size.*

<https://www.restohub.org/gb/operations/menu/restaurant-menu-design/>

MenuCoverDepot. (2013). *Menu engineering: How to raise restaurant profits 15% or more.*

<https://www.menucoverdepot.com/resource-center/articles/restaurant-menu-engineering/>

RestoHub. (n.d.). *Menu pricing: How to calculate food cost percentage.*

<https://www.restohub.org/gb/operations/menu/menu-pricing-how-to-calculate-food-cost-percentage/>

Shanesy, L. (2025). *Engineering your menu to be more profitable.* Convenience & Restaurant News. https://www.convenience.org/Media/Daily/2025/May/22/3-Engineering-Your-Menu-to-Be-More-Profitable_FS

Verywell Mind. (2023). *Understanding the primacy effect.*

<https://www.verywellmind.com/understanding-the-primacy-effect-4685243>

Kasavana, M. L., & Smith, D. (2008). *Menu engineering.* Taylor & Francis.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/15378020802519850>