

Today's special: reading menus as cultural texts

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CASE: 'READING' MENUS

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TODAY'S SPECIAL: READING MENUS AS CULTURAL TEXTS

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Learning Outcomes

After reading and discussing this text, students should be able to:

- Analyze restaurant menus as cultural artifacts.
- Identify how menus represent culinary points of view and reveal cultural norms.
- Recognize the assumptions and expectations associated with restaurant menus.

INTRODUCTION

“The dirty comes with bacon and sausages,” the tall chef explained. “And the clean is vegetarian—with hummus and salad.” It was my first day as a weekend cook and he was walking me through the basics: “The Dirty Brunch” and “The Clean Brunch.” I was the only woman in the kitchen, probably because my name had led him to believe otherwise. In addition to learning how to season potatoes and when to flip pancakes, I was taught that men tend to order “the dirty” and women “the clean.” This begins to reveal the assumptions behind the names of dishes on even the shortest of menus.

A restaurant menu is about a lot more than food. Menus reveal more than the daily specials and how much a burger costs. Like other forms of print media, they are narrative devices. Menus tell stories. They **taxonomize** plants and animals as edible. They represent a restaurant’s owners and cooks, its neighbourhood and region. They tell tales about class and race, about wealth and value, about immigration and identity, about culture and society. Menus “set forth our culinary options,” writes sociologist Priscilla Ferguson, and they “evoke the meals that express food as a distinctive attribute of a given social order.”¹ They are also archives. Menus document historic foodways—from lost ingre-

1. Ferguson 2005, 689.

dients to forgotten dishes—and transformations in taste. They are memories of appetites past. This makes them rich primary sources, and so a menu analysis is a compelling research method for food studies.

A SEAT AT THE TABLE

To study a menu, one must first consider its history. As historian Paul Freedman makes clear, even though many of us take restaurants for granted, “most prosperous, commercial societies in the past managed quite well without them.”² From **taverns** and inns to market stalls and cookshops, eating out has taken a myriad of forms, but the term *restaurant* emerged in Paris around the 1760s. The first restaurants—also called a “restaurateur’s room”—shared their name with the dish they served: *consommé*, a healthful soup.³ Offerings expanded and the restaurant developed a particular protocol: a printed menu announced dishes, tables were separate instead of shared, and diners no longer had to eat at a single time. From at least the 1770s, Paris restaurants advertised their culinary options with a menu—or *carte*. Before this, a menu listed what was served as opposed to options from which to choose. These new menus granted diners the ability to order a meal of their own.

The first menus featured printed folio text enclosed by leather borders or wooden frames. The text was tiny, packed, and, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, resembled a newspaper. But styles changed, keeping pace with other literary productions and, by mid-century, because of their looks, menus now resembled novels. Although the text was French, it spoke a dialect of its

2. Freedman 2016, xxxix.

3. Spang 2000, 173. For earlier examples, like Pompeii’s street food and imperial China’s dining options, see Rawson and Shore, 2019.

own, requiring what historian Rebecca Spang calls **menu literacy**.⁴

Restaurants straddle both public and private space. Historically, many have also upheld (or challenged) racial, gender, and socioeconomic segregation, policing who can dine where and with whom. Writing about nineteenth century Boston, for example, historian Kelly Erby acknowledges this exclusivity, clarifying that “not every restaurant welcomed women, African Americans, or immigrants.”⁵ The model of the restaurant as an exclusive dining venue, serving French food prepared largely by male European chefs, carried on into the first decades of the 20th century in North America. Then the rise of middle-class restaurants transformed dining out into a more egalitarian practice. Ever since, many different types of restaurants have continued to open, as well as close—from Cecilia Chang’s the Mandarin (which in 1961 introduced San Francisco to northern rather than southern Chinese fare) to Harlem’s soul food icon, Sylvia’s Restaurant (opened in 1962 and still running), and from Mother Courage, New York City’s first feminist restaurant (which opened in 1972) to the Eureka Continuum, Toronto’s first Indigenous restaurant (opened in 2000).

But a restaurant is not a restaurant is not a restaurant. Some eateries bear the burden of wearing the label “ethnic”—by which the cuisines of some cultures are naturalized, while others are exoticized. What makes a restaurant “ethnic”?⁶ Even though everyone has an ethnicity, the dominant culture never wears this label, which makes “ethnic” a relational marker and a politically charged label. This demonstrates how eating habits distinguish one culture from another. Food erects borders, constructs differ-

4. Ibid., 186.

5. Erby 2016, xix.

6. For “ethnic food” see Padoongpatt 2011 and Ray 2014.

ence, and administers value. It is central for making and negotiating identity. Menus trace these negotiations.

HOW TO SPEAK MENU

With this history in mind, how can you look beyond your own appetite in order to read menus as cultural texts? What stories does a menu tell about the cuisine it seeks to represent? What language does it use and what knowledge does it assume? Menus frame the relationships between chefs, servers, and diners. By setting forth options one can choose from, they establish expectations, holding the kitchen accountable to what the menu describes. This makes them contracts of sorts: printed agreements by which customers pay a fixed price for a dish the menu lists. Although a menu “textualizes the food,” as Lily Cho points out, there is a gap between the food itself and its textual representation.⁷ Nonetheless, menus use visuals and text to represent what a kitchen sells and serves. They are also ambassadors about larger cultural beliefs that expand beyond a single restaurant. For example, one menu might list dishes to share, which encourages eating out as a collective experience, and another might only have individual dishes, which reflects (especially at lunch time) a busy person’s need to grab something on the go. One might offer some types of meat, like beef, but not other types, like seal. And like showing the option of a “Dirty” or a “Clean” brunch, menus can connect to gendered assumptions about appetites. All of these examples reveal how the food on offer relates to larger societal norms, who eats what, with whom, when, where, how, and who is expected to pay.

It is how menus represent choice (or the lack thereof) that makes them fascinating narrative devices and objects of study. A menu is an inventory of options and a timetable scheduling when a dish

7. Cho 2010, 52.

appears. Does a menu adhere to the appetizer/main/dessert regimen? Or does it abolish a hierarchy between dishes? How does this keep to—or challenge—a culture’s culinary norms? Menus can work with or against time. They can shadow the seasons by serving asparagus in spring, an increasingly common practice sparked by **Slow Food** and the **locavore** movement. They can equally can also challenge the seasons, however, serving the same dishes come rain or shine.

To analyze a menu is to reframe how we look at everyday things, learning to approach them as cultural artifacts that represent specific times and places. A good place to start is with names. “The process of designing a restaurant,” writes sociologist Krishnendu Ray, “can begin with the mere act of naming it.”⁸ Names like *Sylvia’s*, for example, identify the restaurant with a single person, making it a more intimate affair.

Language is important. What language(s) does the menu use? Does it assume the knowledge of any specific terms? What does this knowledge reveal about the diner the menu targets? Le Pavillon, New York City’s seminal French restaurant from 1941 to 1966, presented diners with a menu in French, listing the likes of “Coeur de Céleris au Buerre” and “Germiny aux Paillettes Dorées.” This is an example of the **cultural capital** required to eat at an upscale restaurant at the time. Such a menu expected diners to be both fluent in French as well as in its cuisine’s cooking techniques. Based on language, can you determine if a menu speaks to a working-, middle- or owning-class clientele? The very first menus were long, but styles have since changed. For high-end restaurants it was once fashionable to display a range of options while today, many, including Copenhagen’s NOMA, present a single menu for all.

8. Ray 2014, 107.

Sociologists Wynne Wright and Elizabeth Ransom demonstrate how to connect reading menus in relation to social class. Understanding food “as a source of conspicuous consumption for the wealthy” (referring to Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class*) and a means “for the socially mobile to acquire and display cultural capital” (referring to Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction*), Wright and Ransom share restaurant menus in relation to class and examine how these menus code economic and social value.⁹ Moving beyond a focus on class alone, a menu analysis should employ an intersectional and cultural approach. After all, a tidy division between ethnicity, race, class, and gender is not possible. A menu analysis should zoom both in and out, and ask broader questions about how a menu represents a specific form of eating—a cuisine—and who it includes and excludes. Like the word ethnic, *authentic* is a loaded term. Setting it aside, what can you read on a menu that reveals how a restaurant communicates cultural beliefs, norms, and negotiations between majority and minority cultures?

A MENU OF ONE’S OWN

What do these questions look like in action? For the course, “California Cooking: How the Golden State Changed the Way America Eats,” students analyzed menus from either restaurants in California or ones elsewhere that market themselves as Californian. One looked at the politics of prices at In-N-Out Burger. Another addressed how a Mexican restaurant’s bilingual menu—which includes dishes with names like “A Taste of History”—represents one family’s experience of migration, as well as pressure to assimilate and Americanize. Another considered the menu of the Los Angeles outpost of a Tokyo-based ramen restaurant, and how the same practice in one culture—printing pho-

9. Wright and Ransom 2005, 310–11.

tographs—can carry different associations in another (cheap in a North American context but not so in Japan).

In a class about African American foodways, students selected menus from restaurants that serve Southern or soul food. One looked at a 1949 menu from a theater café, outlining the relationship between eating and entertaining, and, for African Americans, the “chitlin circuit.”¹⁰ Studying both historic and contemporary menus, and showing how they are artifacts representing the history of the Great Migration and eating as a means to go back “home,” several students wrote about Sylvia’s, zooming in on the relationship between food, community, and memory.

In a course surveying the global history of American food, students mapped how restaurants around the world construct and represent American culinary cultures. Many confronted clichés in order to think critically about the nation state, soft power, and cultural capital. One, for example, looked at the American chain TGI Fridays in Ecuador, focusing on the prevalence of meat in tandem with transformations in social class. The larger the middle class, the bigger the appetite for meat. Writing about an Istanbul restaurant that peddles Southern American food, another student considered the politics of naming dishes—from “fusion” to “Tex-Mex.” Citing historian Donna Gabaccia’s claim about the “American penchant to experiment with foods, to combine and mix the foods of many cultural traditions into blended gum-bos or stews and to create ‘smorgasbords,’”¹¹ the essay ended by arguing that this restaurant might also one day include dishes of Turkish origins. One student looked at an American diner in Munich, Germany, and its use of English, an example of a menu

10. For the history of the “chitlin’ circuit”—American music venues where African Americans could perform during the period of racial segregation—see Opie 2008.

11. Gabaccia 2000, 3.

that requires particular linguistic or culinary knowledge, just like New York City's Le Pavilion once did.

CONCLUSION: THE LAST COURSE

It is a challenge to not read menus too literally. Instead, a menu analysis requires both micro and macro thinking—to read between the lines, to read images and design. Restaurants mirror the ebbs and flows of social and political transformations. To follow suit, a menu analysis needs to move beyond a summary of dishes and ask: Why these dishes now? Why call bacon and sausages “dirty” and hummus and salad “clean”? By doing a close reading of a menu, you can learn about restaurant politics—from which animals and plants end up on plates to the construction of ethnicity and how eating salty before sweet fits into culturally specific social orders. To analyze a menu is, therefore, to analyze the culture and society that produces it.

Discussion Questions

- How does analyzing a restaurant menu as a primary source influence your understanding of what a menu is and does?
- Beyond menus, what are some other primary sources related to restaurants?
- What similarities and differences do you see between restaurant menus and other forms of culinary literature, like cookbooks?

Exercise

To analyze a menu it is not necessary to have visited the restaurant or to have eaten its food. Instead, one can do a close reading of a menu—its text, design, and images, or lack thereof—in a manner than is similar to studying other forms of print culture.

Here are some questions to ask.

- What is context of the menu? Is the menu contemporary or historic?
- How does the menu represent a particular cuisine? How inclusive is this representation? Does it take a regional or national approach? Does it stick to the country's culinary clichés or does it include any unexpected dishes? Are there any obvious omissions? Does it try to 'localize' any dishes from elsewhere?
- Is the menu coherent or eclectic? Do any of the dishes stick out?
- How prominent is meat?
- What role does language play? What knowledge is assumed (of foreign words, ingredients, or particular culinary techniques)?
- Does the menu include photographs or illustrations? If so, how do these images relate to the food? Do the images represent particular dishes, or are they more inspirational or atmospheric?
- Does the menu reflect a particular season? Or is this food 'seasonless'?
- How does the menu relate to the restaurant's geography? Does it list producers? Does it mention, for example, what kind of meat it uses, or the names of farmers?
- What role do prices play? Is there a range that might influence what a customer might order?
- How do the drinks complement (or clash with) the rest of

the menu?

- What kind of customer does the menu target?

Additional Resources

More and more libraries are sharing their menu holdings online. For example, in the United States, [the New York Public Library](#) has an extensive digital collection of historic restaurant menus. [The Conrad N. Hilton Library](#) at the Culinary Institute of America has over 4,000 historical menus, including [international ones](#). [The University of Washington](#) also has a digital menu collection, as does [the Los Angeles Public Library](#). Although not yet available online, [McGill Library](#) has an extensive collection.

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