Beyond The Menu: Understanding Menu Decision-Making In Small-Scale Food Service

MR. VINCE RICHARD Q. GOMEZ and DR. MARK ALVIN V. LAZARO

Gordon College, Olongapo City

Abstract: The decision-making procedures that go into developing and designing menus in small food service businesses are examined in this qualitative study. Three main topics are identified by the research through in-depth interviews with local restaurant and café owners: constraints, dynamics, and engineering. In order to increase revenue, engineering refers to the strategic structuring of menus through layout, item classification, and promotional components like combinations and visual highlights. In order to optimize market response, Dynamics focuses on matching menu selections with consumer preferences, seasonal trends, and demographic targeting. Constraints draw attention to the operational limits that small companies confront, such as staff skills, kitchen capacity, and ingredient availability, all of which have an impact on menu selections and simplification tactics. These results highlight the intricacy of menu choices, which encompass more than just design and cost; they also represent a delicate balancing act between innovation, consumer insight, and commercial realism.

Keywords: menu engineering, small-scale food service, customer targeting, menu simplification, seasonal offerings, operational constraints, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Menus are strategic tools that reflect the identity, goals, and operational realities of food service establishments, far beyond simply listing dishes. Lin et al. (2023) emphasize that both digital and traditional menus influence consumer behavior by shaping perceptions of service, food, and information quality. This highlights the role of menu design in customer engagement and satisfaction. For small-scale restaurants, where resources are limited and customer preferences shift rapidly, effective menu management is vital to operational success and profitability. Ye (2022) affirms that menus function as key communication tools that affect both customer choices and sales outcomes. As Tom and Annaraud (2021) note, restaurants that fail to adapt their menus to evolving consumer demands face a heightened risk of underperformance, with nearly 60% failing within their first three years. Thus, menu design is not just about food—it is a critical business strategy.

Menu choices in the restaurant industry are shaped by a blend of commercial, logistical, and artistic considerations. Beyond deciding which dishes to serve, owners must carefully plan how items are arranged, priced, and presented factors that directly influence brand perception, kitchen efficiency, and customer satisfaction. Strategic pricing models, like the good-better-best approach, can steer customers toward higher-priced options when designed effectively (Ngan et al., 2020; Silvestre et al., 2022). Menu layout and language also play a key role in shaping perceived value and enhancing user experience (Ye, 2022; Webb et al., 2022). Pricing strategies not only affect perceived value but also impact operational performance and profitability, with clear links to customer satisfaction and repeat business (Mufhtie et al., 2022; Yusni et al., 2022). These decisions must also adapt to local

preferences, resource limitations, and kitchen capabilities, making menu planning a complex yet vital business function.

The purpose of this study is to explore how small food service firms make decisions about key menu items, using a qualitative approach to examine real-world strategies, practices, and challenges faced by cafés and restaurants. Menu management has emerged as a critical factor in the operational success of food establishments, particularly for small businesses. Nebioğlu (2020) highlights menu management as a strategic tool that aligns offerings with market demands, while Setiyawati et al. (2023) show how methods like clustering and SVD analysis help optimize revenue by evaluating popular items and pricing. This study aims to capture the nuanced interactions between consumer preferences and operational strategies that influence menu development.

The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the delicate balance between menu innovation and real-world constraints in the food service industry. Lin et al. (2023) emphasize that while digital innovations can boost consumer engagement, they must be thoughtfully implemented to address variety-seeking behavior and operational limitations. Santos and Sotelo-Drequito (2024) further affirm that innovative and diverse menus are positively linked to customer satisfaction. Thus, successful menu design must integrate creativity with practical considerations such as cost, staffing, and supply chain dynamics.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate how small-scale food service businesses decide on their menus, this study used a qualitative research approach. To ensure representation across various food business types, a variety of cafés, bakeries, and small restaurants in Olongapo City were chosen using a purposive sampling technique. A total of twenty-four (24) establishments. Semi-structured interviews with company owners, managers, and important kitchen or service personnel who are directly involved in menu planning and execution were the main technique used to collect data. In order to understand social phenomena, qualitative research emphasizes the richness and depth of context and voice.3 This approach is interpretive or constructive (Lim, 2023), seeking to reveal the "what," "why," "when," "where," "who," and "how" (also known as the "5W1H") behind social behaviors and interactions rather than just quantifying events. Qualitative research embraces openness and uses a range of comparable techniques, including participant observation, indepth and focus group interviews, and open-ended questions, to ensure a thorough investigation of the phenomena in the study of the subjective experiences, viewpoints, and meanings that people ascribe to their social environment. The thematic analysis technique's tenets—data coding, topic identification, theme refinement, and findings reporting—apply to other qualitative techniques including discourse analysis (Flick, 2022). One technique for examining qualitative data is thematic analysis. Understanding the meaning of participantused keywords allows for the detection and reporting of patterns in a data collection, which are subsequently analyzed for their intrinsic meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Liebenberg et al., 2020; Xu & Zammit, 2020). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme is a systematic meaning found in data that informs the study question. Furthermore, a theme is not always essential to the meaning being expressed just because it recurs or occurs often in a data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

MENU DESIGN & ENGINEERING.

Restaurants strategically design and structure menus to influence customer behavior, boost sales, and optimize profitability through layout, organization, and promotional techniques. Menu engineering provides a framework for this, combining visual design with data-driven analysis. Bergman et al. (2021) found that including price and calorie information can lead to healthier choices, with customers ordering meals with 93 fewer calories on average. This highlights how thoughtful menu presentation guides decisions. Additionally, Setiyawati (2021) emphasizes that analyzing menu performance helps tailor offerings to consumer preferences, enabling restaurants to forecast sales and enhance menu appeal effectively.

"The menu is organized by category. like coffee, non-coffee drinks, pastries, rice meals, and addons." Participant 7

"Yes, they use small icons like a coffee bean to show bestsellers and an ice cube icon to indicate drinks that are iced only. The menu is also organized by category to make it easier to understand." Participant 8

"Our menu is organized by category: Hot & Iced Beverage, Breads & Pastries, Sandwiches & Light Meals, Seasonal Specials." Participant 11

"Our menu is organized by category, so it's easy for customers to find what they're looking for. We have sections for sandwiches, fresh salads, all-day brunch meals, seafood plates, and side items. We also have a separate part for kids' meals, pastries and desserts, coffee drinks, non-coffee beverages, and cocktails in the evening. We don't usually offer set or combo meals our guests like to mix and match based on their cravings." Participant 12

"The menu is typically organized by category Burgers, Chicken, Fries & Sides, Desserts & Shakes, Drinks, Breakfast. They heavily use set meals and combo meals." Participant 23

"We use an interactive designs like icons, descriptions, and boxes to highlight that helps the menu to become pleasing to customers" Participant 22

"Yes, we use several strategies to highlight key items on our menu. These include Digital menu boards-Seasonal drinks and limited-time offers are often given priority visuals. placement with bright Icons and labels- We use visual indicators like "New". "Featured". In-store displays- We promote popular or seasonal items at the counter and pick-up area using tabletop signs, posters, and product samples. Descriptive naming and visuals- It is often accompanied by high-quality images to entice customers." Participant 24

Category-based layouts.

Organizing menu items into clear sections—such as and desserts—enhances appetizers, mains, navigation and improves the overall customer experience. Limo et al. (2023) found that wellstructured menus help patrons make informed decisions, boosting satisfaction. Santos and Sotelo-Drequito (2024) emphasize that diverse, clearly categorized offerings contribute to positive dining experiences and encourage repeat Additionally, Erdem (2021) notes that when menu labeling is paired with organized categories, it supports healthier choices while reducing cognitive overload, reinforcing the value of structured menu design in customer engagement.

Strategic highlighting.

Using visual cues like icons, boxes, colors, or special formatting to highlight high-margin or signature items is an effective strategy rooted in cognitive and design principles. Gardony et al. (2022) show that well-designed visual elements enhance attention and recognition, improving user engagement. Similarly, Su et al. (2024) demonstrate that contextual visual cues aid in efficient target identification. In menu design, these techniques help guide customer choices toward key items, enhancing both sales and user experience.

Combo/Set-meal leverage.

Creating bundled meal options or set menus is a strategic approach to boost average order value and simplify customer decision-making. Research shows that bundled meals increase purchase likelihood by offering perceived value, especially among pricesensitive consumers (Wang et al., 2021; Mackay et al., 2021). However, Reeves (2020) notes that such bundling can lead to higher calorie consumption, raising public health concerns. Additionally, KRIEGER et al. (2021) highlight that value meals, particularly those marketed to children with unhealthy beverage options, can negatively influence dietary habits. Despite these concerns, bundling remains an effective sales strategy in food service operations.

DYNAMICS.

Understanding and responding to customer behavior, preferences, and market segments is key to aligning menu offerings with demand and boosting sales. Trahutama (2024) notes that effective promotions tailored to customer preferences can turn interest into purchases. Similarly, Liu et al. (2024) emphasize the value of customer segmentation in recognizing diverse consumer behaviors and guiding differentiation strategies. By leveraging these insights, businesses can adapt menus to meet specific needs, enhance satisfaction, and drive performance.

"Yes, the store extensively tests new dishes. Market Testing: They often introduce new items in select regional markets to gauge consumer response, operational feasibility, and supply chain readiness. Focus Groups: Gathering feedback from target consumers.

Internal Testing: Ensuring consistency, quality, and ease of preparation in their kitchens." Participant 23

"Our target market includes a wide range of customers, but primarily urban professionals, students, and coffee enthusiasts aged 18–45. Many of our customers are on-the-go individuals who

value convenience, quality, and consistency. We also focus on people who appreciate a comfortable, social atmosphere whether they're working remotely, meeting friends, or taking a break. In recent years, we've also expanded to appeal to health-conscious consumers and those looking for plant-based or dietary-specific options." Participant 24.

"Yes, we've seen some changes in our target market over time. When we first opened, most of our customers were working professionals, tourists, and people commuting through Subic. Over time, we've noticed a growing number of students, young adults, and families coming in, especially during the evenings. We've also seen more customers interested in plant-based options, non-dairy alternatives, and lighter food choices, so our menu and promotions have adjusted slightly to reflect those preferences." Participant 20

"Yes, they sometimes offer seasonal drinks or snacks. These items usually do well, especially when promoted online." Participant 6

"Yes, we usually choose our bestsellers, new items, or seasonal specials. We promote them because they are popular, eye-catching, and can attract more customers." Participant 8

Consistency.

Identifying and maintaining reliable bestsellers that perform well across various service channels and time periods is crucial in today's omnichannel environment. Trenz et al. (2020) emphasize that integrated cross-channel strategies improve customer satisfaction and retention by providing a seamless experience. Continuously tracking high-performing items allows businesses to strengthen consistency and capitalize on consumer preferences across different platforms, driving long-term success.

Targeting.

Tailoring menu items and pricing to specific customer segments based on demographics, spending power, and preferences is essential for competitive advantage. Chen et al. (2020) emphasize that personalized pricing and effective targeting help restaurants align offerings with consumer behavior, enabling management to focus on segments that drive profitability. Understanding these differences allows for strategic menu and pricing adjustments that better meet customer expectations and enhance market relevance.

Seasonality.

Leveraging seasonal ingredients, holidays, and limited time offers can create urgency and attract new customers by tapping into consumer psychology. These strategies enhance

engagement and drive sales, especially when paired with platforms like TikTok for live marketing, which fosters a sense of exclusivity and trust (Siregar et al., 2023). Limited-time offerings capitalize on the perception of scarcity, making products more appealing and effective in drawing in new clientele during peak seasons.

COST CONSTRAINTS

Balancing kitchen capacity, staff skills, ingredient costs, and preparation complexity is crucial to maintaining menu quality and brand identity. Operational constraints directly affect service quality and customer satisfaction, as limited budgets and time pressures can compromise food quality (Trinca et al., 2021). Strategic staffing, such as incorporating specialized roles like dietitians, has been shown to improve meal quality while reducing costs, demonstrating that operational realities significantly influence both financial outcomes and service standards (Yona et al., 2020).

"Yes, we do promote specific menu items on social media and through advertising. We usually focus on bestsellers, seasonal specials, and new menu items." Participant 10

"We use several strategies to draw attention to certain items on the menu. This includes placing bestsellers or signature dishes in boxes or highlighting them with icons such as stars or chef's hats. Descriptive language is carefully crafted to evoke the taste and texture of the dish, making it more appealing." Participant 11

"When deciding the order or placement of items on our menu, we focus on making it easy and natural for customers to browse. We usually start with the most popular categories like brunch meals and coffee since those are what people often look for first.

Within each section, bestsellers or signature items are placed near the top to catch attention. We also group similar items together, like all espresso drinks in one part, and non-coffee drinks in another, so everything feels organized.

The goal is to guide the customer through the menu in a way that's simple, logical, and encourages them to explore more items." Participant 12

"We think these items are popular because they offer something unique, comforting, and visually appealing all at the same time. For example, our Sea Salt Latte stands out because it uses local Zambales salt, which gives it a signature sweet-salty flavor that's not too common elsewhere. Our Spanish Latte and Dirty Horchata are also smooth, flavorful, and easy to enjoy even for non-coffee drinkers.

As for the Corned Beef Breakfast Plate, it's a

familiar Filipino comfort food, but we serve it with a twist, like house-made mustard sauce and better plating. It feels homey but elevated. People also love how these dishes and drinks look, great for photos and social media. On top of that, we consistently hear good feedback about taste, balance, and presentation. That's probably why guests keep coming back for them." Participant 12.

Signature Dishes.

Keeping labor-intensive or complex dishes on the menu is essential when they reflect the restaurant's identity and brand. These signature dishes often embody a unique culinary style, fostering customer loyalty and shaping dining choices. Božić and Milošević (2021) emphasize that top restaurants are known for their culinary innovations—especially standout dishes that capture guest attention—strengthening brand identity and long-term success. Such innovations not only distinguish a restaurant in a competitive market but also influence consumer expectations of quality and uniqueness.

Monitoring.

Tracking food costs, waste, and preparation efficiency is vital for maintaining profitability and optimizing kitchen operations. Effective management of preconsumer food waste—through accurate forecasting and menu planning—can significantly reduce costs (Alcorn et al., 2020). Contrary to common belief, implementing healthier food services often results in neutral or favorable financial outcomes (Naughton et al., 2024). Additionally, technological innovations like IoT sensors enable real-time monitoring, helping reduce food loss and improve inventory control (Costa et al., 2022). These strategies support data-driven decisions that enhance operational efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

Simplification.

Reducing menu complexity by removing labor-intensive or specialized items can help streamline kitchen operations during peak hours. Signature dishes, however, remain essential in defining a restaurant's identity and brand. These standout offerings not only reflect a unique culinary style but also build customer loyalty and influence dining choices. Božić and Milošević (2021) highlight that culinary innovations—especially new, attention-grabbing dishes—play a key role in a restaurant's success, serving as branding tools that shape consumer expectations of quality and distinctiveness.

CONCLUSION

In small-scale food service businesses, choosing a menu is a strategic process influenced by operational constraints, profitability targets, and consumer preferences. Three main themes emerge from the study's findings: engineering, which employs menu structure and visual design to influence purchases; dynamics, which focuses on matching products to

consumer trends and behavior; and constraints, which include staffing levels, food costs, and kitchen limits. These themes demonstrate that effective menu planning requires efficiency and flexibility in addition to creativity. To design menus that are both enticing and sustainable, owners must strike a balance between operational requirements, customer satisfaction, and brand identity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Sales information, customer reviews, and kitchen efficiency measures should all be used by small food enterprises to assess their menus on a regular basis. Profitability and service may be enhanced by teaching employee's fundamental menu engineering strategies, such as emphasizing high-margin goods or streamlining offers. Working together, front-of-house and kitchen employees can solve issues with capacity or preparation. Additionally, improving menus according to seasonal ingredients and utilizing trustworthy, local suppliers can improve customer appeal and product consistency. Small food businesses may develop menus that are useful, market-driven, and in line with long-term corporate objectives by fusing operational strategy with consumer knowledge.

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