

STORIES THROUGH MENUS

Rachel Byars

Menus play an integral part in the design and communication of food and beverage businesses. Menus have been described as being similar to a programme at a play, indicating what the customer can expect from the restaurant.¹ Thus the menu is a reflection of the image, design, cuisine and characteristics of the surroundings, providing a friendly conversation point and tool for connoisseurship regarding the setting and personality of the restaurant.

Menus may be considered works of art, artifacts which tell stories through a variety of narrative forms or can be left to the imagination of the viewer. These stories may be retold through words, images or improvisation, and are often embellished to educate, enlighten, amuse and engage the audience. The author has used the theme of storytelling through menus in her teaching practice, sharing her experiences and information on restaurants, gastronomy, 'servicescapes' and customer experience. It is not just the story, but how the story is told that matters, and the emotional connection that is made through the menu. Experiences must be created so that there is an intimate connection between the menu, restaurant and the customer; so that the latter will want to return.

For many customers, the dining experience involves seeking an experience of indulgence and pleasure, and this aim will be assisted through the design of a menu. The menu may be viewed as the starting point for a performance, a visual artform which is later depicted by the culinary dish itself and is experienced directly by the customer. More often than not, the menu tells a story about the restaurant, the chef de patron and the food itself.

Sundbo and Hagedorn-Rasmussen's definition of a customer experience shows that the customer must be actively involved in some way. According to them, a customer experience is a mental journey that leaves the diner with memories of having been part of something special, having learned something, or simply had fun.² The dining experience is viewed as a social and cultural act in a context that reflects the consumer's aspirations and lifestyle, and one where people look for the fulfillment of certain desires and the expectation that certain moods will be created.³

The menu is integral to the servicescape of the restaurant – one among a multitude of factors that might entice the customer to enter and participate in the dining experience.⁴ The menu provides a snapshot of the dining experience and serves as the first impression for any customer. The imagery, atmosphere and sense of prestige of the restaurant are conveyed subtly in the design of the menu, which is not only used to define the product range of the food and beverage operation, but provides an opportunity for the promotion and sale of items on the menu.

The menu acts as a 'lens' on the dining experience that is about to be enjoyed. The creation of the menu is inspired by the chief 'artist' at the venue – the chef, who may be viewed as the gifted producer of an 'original work,' or as an 'artisan,' crafting handmade products that will later be consumed. The inspiration that chefs are able to draw from their craft is paramount, ensuring the authenticity of the food produced; the challenge is in the way it is promoted to the customer.

Thus a menu can be used to persuade and tempt customers, and each one tells its own story through a range of visual elements such as the artistry employed, the culinary language used, accolades and awards listed, through to simple descriptions of the delicacies and delights on offer. Each menu will tell a story that can be unraveled by the customer, whether through interpretation, imagery or direct enquiry.

Within my own teaching practice, I have had the opportunity to share my work and life experiences with students in a number of different ways, especially through storytelling. This method offers a means of recounting and expressing experiences, emotions and ideas in different forms and is advocated as a teaching tool by reflective practitioners and researchers.⁵ It is not just the story, but also how the story is told that matters. Menus may be used as catalysts to elicit a range of stories and are an ideal method of ensuring student participation.

Stories provide an opportunity for collaborative discussion and reflection within a group of learners. While perusing an eatery's menus, taking in its style, students may consider such topics as menu engineering and design, but it is the stories behind them that often intrigue them most. Three menus, along with their illustrations, have been chosen for discussion from restaurants in the United States and the United Kingdom. The stories elicited from each menu are the author's personal interpretations, and of course may differ from person to person.

STORY ONE – LE GAVROCHE, LONDON

The first story I want to present relates to the highly respected and influential two-star Michelin restaurant Le Gavroche, situated in the heart of Mayfair in London. It is viewed as a culinary institution in the United Kingdom. The restaurant is named after the fictional character Gavroche, from Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*. The image is of a scruffy boy or 'gamin' (a young homeless boy who roams the streets), also aptly referred to as an 'urchin.' This image of the gamin is poles apart from the elegance and style espoused in the surroundings of Le Gavroche. Nevertheless, it illustrates the humble beginnings of a celebrated restaurant which has influenced the British culinary scene since 1967.

The menu cover depicts the totality of the experience of Le Gavroche, foregrounding the chef de patron, Michel Roux Jnr; with his father, Albert Roux, founder of the restaurant along with his brother Michel Roux, peeping out of the tableau in the background. A feast of food and wine surrounds the portrait of Michel Roux Jnr, set above the golden lettering of the words 'Le Gavroche.'

The story told on the menu cover is one of pedigree and heritage; it conveys the strong impression that the restaurant is an iconic gastronomic institution, one which has produced many prominent chefs. For the appreciation of art lovers, the restaurant walls are adorned with original works by Picasso, Dali and Chagall, which aspire to feed the mind as effectively as the artists within the kitchen feed the appetite. Table settings are crisp, some remarkable sculptures provide an effective talking point for guests, while the flawless service is designed to impress.



Figure 1. The Le Gavroche logo.



Figure 2. Le Gavroche Menu Cover.

STORY TWO – A VOCE, NEW YORK



Figure 3. A Voce Menu.

The design scheme of this New York Italian restaurant reflects the clean lines and minimalistic approach of Italian designers Armani, Ferrari and Lamborghini. The menu is likewise simple and minimalistic in design, and matches the layout and sophisticated urban setting of the restaurant. Inspiration for the culinary fare is drawn from the regions of Italy, along with the freshest ingredients that are in season. Rustic undertones ensure that the simple pleasures of Italian cooking blend into the sophisticated modern ambience of A Voce. A sense of authenticity is suggested by some of the menu descriptions: 'country style,' 'My Grandmother's,' and 'Paul's.' This culinary language gives the diner an impression of homeliness and familiarity, a feeling which aims to both gratify and delight.

The chef encourages the use of words like 'yummy,' asserting that customers should feel good about their dining experience. He would rather have a diner say, "Wow, that was delicious," than "Wow, that was interesting."

STORY THREE – SPARKS STEAK HOUSE, NEW YORK

Sparks Steak House has a worldwide reputation for its steak and wine list. Opened by brothers Pat and Mike Cetta in 1966 as Sparks Pub, 11 years later they changed the name to Sparks Steak House. The restaurant achieves a delicate balance between tradition and big-city chic, although many regulars prefer the term 'old school.'

The interior is spacious yet cosy, elegant but informal. The term 'classic' comes to mind when considering the wood-paneled interior; the grand carpets under foot and the chandeliers overhead. From the moment you are greeted, you know that dining here is going to be a memorable experience.

The oversized menu, the extensive wine list and the 'mobster' ambience – referring to the assassination in 1985 of mafia boss Paul Castellano on the orders of John Gotti as he entered the premises – all make Sparks a restaurant to remember. A copy of the menu itself costs US\$80, along with authentic splashes of meat juices and wine!

The sharing of stories like these allows students to gain from their culinary experiences and also provides the opportunity for them to bring their menus into the classroom and share the interesting stories that lie behind the printed words. This exercise cements the connections that have been created through the imagery of the menu and the overall dining experience.

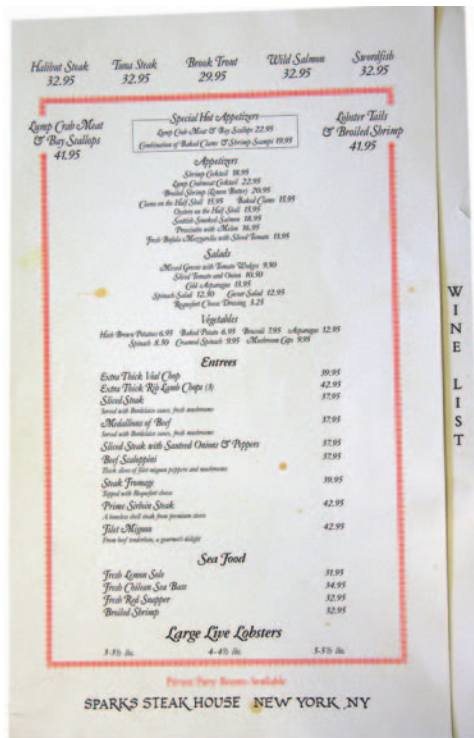


Figure 4. Sparks Steak House Main Menu.

Rachel Byars is a principal lecturer in the School of Applied Business at Otago Polytechnic in Dunedin.

- 1 LH Kotschevar and MR Escoffier, *Management by Menu* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994).
- 2 J Sundbo and P Hagedorn-Rasmussen, "The Backstaging of Experience Production," in *Creating Experience in the Experience Economy*, eds J Sundbo and P Darmer (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2008).
- 3 I Gustafsson, A Ostrom, J Johansson and L Mossberg, "The Five Aspects Meal Model: A Tool for Developing Meal Services in Restaurants," *Journal of Foodservice*, 17 (2006), 84-93.
- 4 MJ Bitner, "Servicescapes: The Impact of Physical Surroundings on Customers and Employees," *Journal of Marketing*, 56 (1992), 51-71.
- 5 J McDrury and MG Alterio, *Learning through Storytelling in Higher Education: Using Reflection and Experience to Improve Learning* (London: Kogan Page/RoutledgeFalmer, 2003).

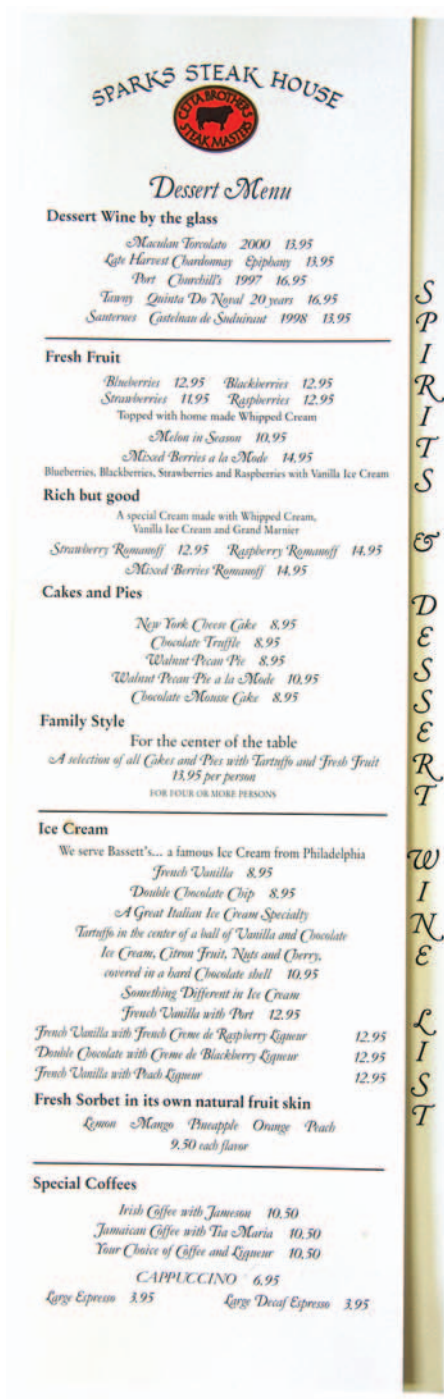


Figure 5. Sparks Steak House Dessert Menu.