The Menu Trends That Define Dining Right Now

We gathered 121 menus from restaurants all over the country. Together, they offer a glimpse into the tastes and values of today.

By Tejal Rao, Julia Moskin and Sam Sifton | Jan. 15, 2020

Restaurant menus can be surprisingly revealing. Sure, they'll tell you what you can order at the hottest restaurant in your city on a particular evening. But they're also a time capsule of culture, reflecting the comfort, habits, flavors and values of an era.

That's been true since the first American menus of the 1840s, which listed dishes from the French tradition that was then ascendant, and it remains so, well into the age of QR code linkage.

Last year, as the New York Times Food team traveled the country to scout candidates for our annual list of favorite restaurants, we also set out to understand, more broadly, what defines eating out today.

After years of abundant dividers, curbside delivery, masked servers and, yes, QR codes, one thing was immediately clear: Physical menus aren't dead. Far from it. They're more important than ever.

We visited hundreds of restaurants of varying styles, cuisines and price points — and left with 121 menus in hand. Together, they provide a snapshot of the distinctive new shape of dining right now.

I. The Food

Trendy offerings like tinned fish and E12 beefs of above show no signs of disappearing, but some dishes and ingredients feel especially of the moment.

II. The Aesthetic

Like purses, menus have details. Many restaurants favor a vertical, half-page format, which is easier to hold than a full-page one. With no pages to flip through, and often, fewer items to choose from.

But beyond that stricture, anything goes. "There is a lot more openness to be unique in their brand and not feels like what everyone else is doing," said Lisa Fresen, a founder of the design agency Atlas Branding in Asheville, N.C., who consults for restaurants across the country. "As a designer, we felt more liberated being able to suggest ideas that we wouldn't suggest" a few years ago.

Bolder and brighter.

While white and off-white have long felt like the default menu colors, some restaurants are setting themselves apart by adding pops of neon and bright patterns. Dazzling prints made a noticeable splash in the year of Marfa maximum.

Claire Dudenaitis, the art director at Pulaski and Friends, designed a bright pink menu for Hainan Chicken House in Flushing, a contrast with the yellowish and the rest of the dining room. "It is part of the interior design," she said.

Honey, they shrunk the fonts!

What is this, a restaurant for ants? Consider this a formal plea to increase font sizes as we don't need a magnifying glass to read the menu. Some of the smallest typefaces appear at Pipa Palace in Los Angeles and Tamarind in Houston, but there that appeared to be as small as 5 points. (My comparison, the New York Times is printed in 7-point Imperial Regular Font, though we sometimes go down to 6 points.)

Cute mascots to root for.

Cetacea, abstract shapes and line drawings inspired by artists like Henri Matisse and Joan Cornicus pop up all over these menus. But many restaurants have gone beyond simple illustrations, representing themselves with mascots, usually in the form of animals.

Like fashion labels, "restaurants have become brands," said Ms. Pulaski. "People are tired of having logos everywhere, but having an icon is way to be distinctive but not too obvious."

Informal is in.

Cheesy bons, wonky formatting, basic printer paper, a slightly messier look. Some menus look as if they were created by a design-school freshman. And that's the point.

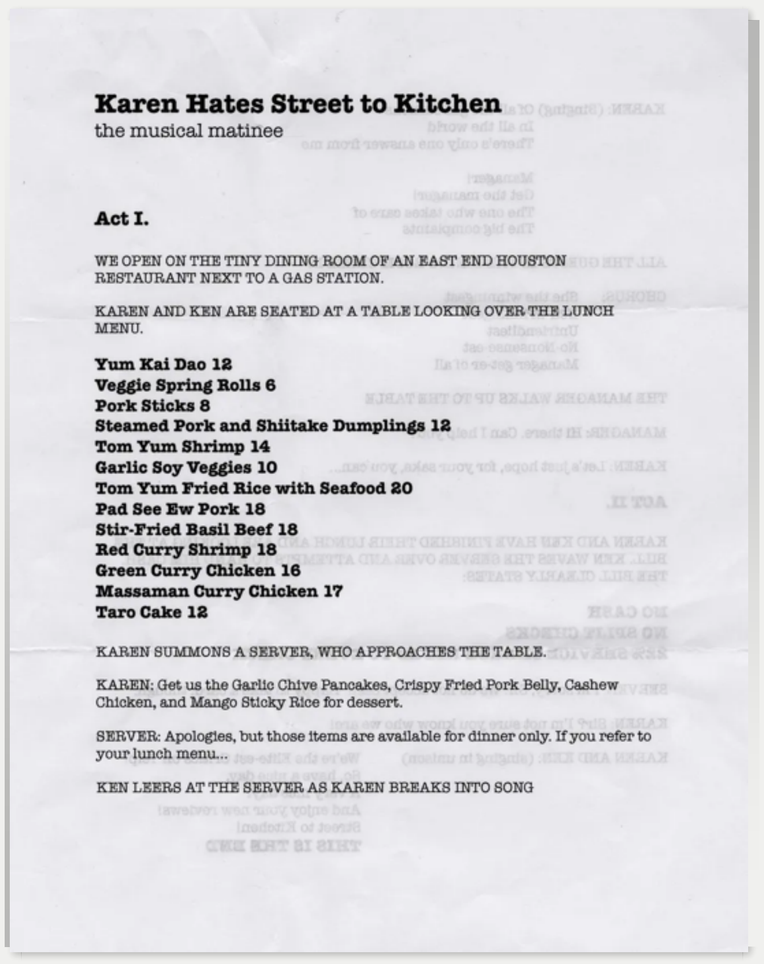
"It is intentionally done where it looks less formed and way more approachable," said Rudy Pozzi, a designer in Los Angeles. Making menus that don't look pristine, she added, conveys "more of a humanness."

Breakfast
Breakfast Burritos
Tacos
Tacos 3 or more
Tacos 2 or more
Quesadillas
Quesadilla Bacon
Quesadilla Bacon
Quesadilla Bacon

No matter which restaurant they came from, these menus exude a warmth and enthusiasm for dining out. Some even made us laugh.

… Like the menu at Street to Kitchen, a Thai restaurant in Houston, that doubles as a three-act play.

Because what's dinner without a show?



Karen Hates Street to Kitchen
the musical matinee

Act I.

WE OPEN ON THE TINY DINING ROOM OF AN EAST END HOUSTON RESTAURANT NEXT TO A GAS STATION.

KAREN AND KEN ARE SEATED AT A TABLE LOOKING OVER THE LUNCH MENU.

Yum Kai Dao 12
Veggie Spring Rolls 6
Pork Sticks 8
Steamed Pork and Shiitake Dumplings 12
Tom Yum Shrimp 14
Garlic Soy Veggies 10
Tom Yum Fried Rice with Seafood 20
Pad See Ew Pork 18
Stir-Fried Basil Beef 18
Red Curry Shrimp 18
Green Curry Chicken 16
Massaman Curry Chicken 17
Taro Cake 12

KAREN SUMMONS A SERVER, WHO APPROACHES THE TABLE.

KAREN: Get us the Garlic Chive Pancakes, Crispy Fried Pork Belly, Cashew Chicken, and Mango Sticky Rice for dessert.

SERVER: Apologies, but those items are available for dinner only. If you refer to your lunch menu...

KEN LEERS AT THE SERVER AS KAREN BREAKS INTO SONG

Editing by Tanya Sichynsky and Patrick Farrell. Photo editing by Gabriel H. Sanchez. Additional production by Sonny Figueroa, Alessandra Montalto, William O'Donnell, Rumsey Taylor and Patricia Wall.

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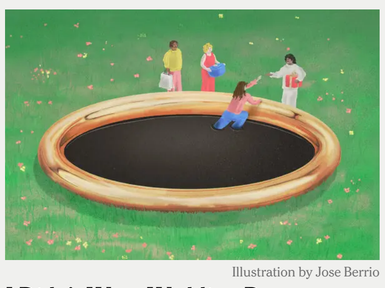

Illustration by Jose Berrio

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