

Emily Spivack  
Cog Sci 190  
Case Study

## Restaurant Menus

**Overview.** Every time you go out to dinner, you are presented with your dining experience choices in the form of a menu. Some are up on the wall, others are laminated and given to you, and a few are printed every day. Each restaurant shows its culture, values and, most importantly, collection of food in their menu. It is usually the first thing you see and the best way to remember and communicate your dining experience.

The vast range of restaurants differs in price and cuisine and aesthetic, and the menu encapsulates it all. This organizing system follows general pattern across the spectrum, varying most deeply depending on how expensive the food is and the cuisine it serves. The amount of dishes to choose from, item description and how the dishes are divided up strongly correlates with price and the larger constraint of culture.

**What is being organized?** The system is designed to manage the system of food the restaurant is producing. The main resource here is the food itself. The dishes are categorized in the menu by the focus of the dish or the course in the meal the dish aligns with. For example, a dish with greens and other vegetables to accent it is a salad. Where a salad is a pretty objective dish, in most cases, the resources are sorted in different ways depending on the focus of the cuisine. If there is a dish with spaghetti and pasta, at an American place it would be considered just an entree. At an Italian restaurant, however, it might be seen as a pasta dish specifically. In addition to the food, the prices are included on the menu and are considered a resource.

**Why is it being organized?** The restaurant wants to organize the dishes it serves in a clear manner. Without any sort of system, the jumble of dishes might be overwhelming to the customer and make it difficult to make a decision. Whether an enormous menu like that of Cheesecake Factory or McDonalds, or a smaller, more refined menu like Chez Panisse, the menu is an

architectural structure to highlight the distinctive factors of the dishes. In some restaurants, menus can also allow for mixing and matching of dishes to enhance the experience of the diner and indicating the possible prices for all options.

**How much is it being organized?** The granularity of the menu depends on the cuisine and price level of the restaurant. More high-end eating establishments tend to have very detailed descriptions of the dish. A big one is places naming the origins of the ingredients. Linguist Dan Jurafsky conducted a study with over 650 menus, and the most expensive places mention the origin of the ingredients "more than 15 times as often as inexpensive restaurants" (Jurafsky, 7). With that, they found that higher-end menus are more likely to talk about the Chef's choice over the diner's and tend to use "fancy words." Fancy really just means longer words, like "traditionally," "complements," and "tenderness," whereas cheaper restaurants shorten words like "sides" or "decaf" (Jurafsky, 9). Jurafsky and his colleagues found how specific words can be associated with the price of the dish, from type of food specifically to how many "appealing adjectives" are used, which tend to bring the price down significantly (Jurafsky, 9).

Inexpensive restaurants allow for more choices to the patron to mix and match for their meal and adjust the price accordingly. This can include size options, meat choices and the addition or reduction of "side dishes." More expensive restaurants, however, were found, in the research for both Jurafsky and this study, to have half as many dishes. Having fewer options is helpful in multiple ways. One of which is that the dishes prepared by higher-end restaurants tend to be more involved and take more preparation. By limiting options, it allows for more precise "mise en place" in the kitchen and more precise and delicious results. Fewer options also shows the diners the specialized tastes of the kitchen and that the chefs know what is best for the diners.

**When is it being organized?** For most establishments, menus are first organized at the opening of the restaurant. Others, like Chez Panisse or Gather, change weekly, monthly, or seasonally depending on the ingredients available. Cheaper food or menus from chain restaurants tend to stick to one menu with a few seasonal products, like the McRib from McDonald's or the Pumpkin Spice Latte from Starbucks.

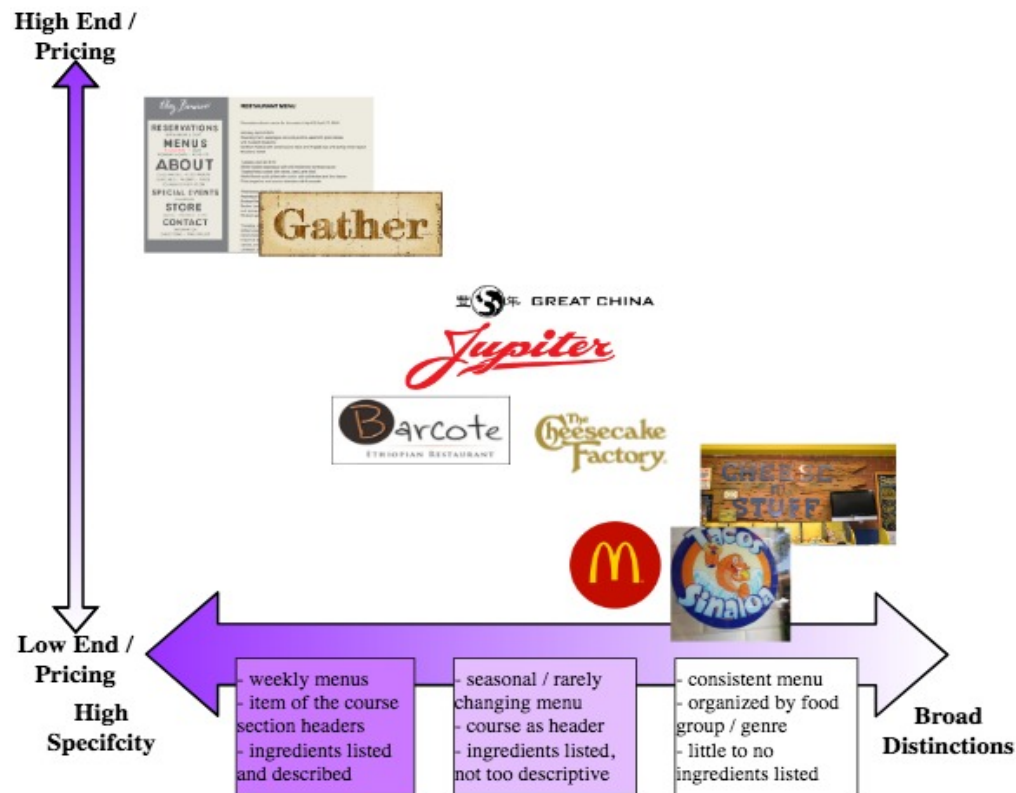


Figure 1. Spectrum of Menus from pricing to specificity

**How or by whom is it being organized?** Each restaurant is unique, but there are a few trends that can be extrapolated. Asian and most non-Western cuisine have menus organized by the type of dish. With Chinese restaurants, usually regardless of price, dishes fall under headers such as noodles, vegetables, or chicken. Sushi menus categorize by the type of dish, like Nigiri or rolls, as well as other types of food like small plates or noodle dishes. There are often Chef's Specials across the board, with a blend of genres or seasonal characters. American and European menus tend to organize by the course of the meal the dish falls into, such as Appetizers, Entrées, or Dessert. Some specify the main dishes as well, like Sandwiches or Surf & Turf.

This pattern reveals the cultural constraints on this organizing system. Eastern countries have a more interpersonal culture, with an emphasis on the group and the social consequences of individual actions. In Eastern cuisine, dishes are meant to be shared, so the order is for the table. Western cultures are focused on the individual experience and everything in context with the self, so in American or European restaurants, the meals are individualized. Of course, sharing is permitted, but the servings are single-sized as opposed to most non-Western restaurants where things come in large plates.

Within the culture constraint on restaurant menus, we see a further specification of socio-economic status constraining the system. Menus for cuisine outside of the Euro-American realm, like Asian and Latino cuisine, usually always follow suit with the lower-end menu structure. People from these countries tend to be in lower socio-economic status in America, bringing food prices down so their constituents can afford the food. This pattern shows a correlation with the less-specific, lower-end restaurant menu structure, regardless of the restaurant's actual price, purely because of the socio-economic constraint on the culture itself.

**Other Considerations.** Like any research, the structures found in this study fits most menus it looked into, but there are always a few outliers that can put these observations into question. Most fusion restaurants, for example, are classified as a blend of Asian cuisine with American dishes, so how are these menus organized? It varies but they do tend to lean to the Americanized structure of organizing by course rather than ingredient.

Cheaper restaurants may still have a lot of options, but some are getting more descriptive about ingredients. McDonalds' online menu, for example, has recently made a move to step out of its cheap fast-food class by having a paragraph description for each dish. The Egg White Delight McMuffin is listed as "Made with 100% freshly grilled egg whites, extra lean Canadian bacon, smooth white cheddar and a warm, freshly toasted English muffin. The Egg White Delight is 280 calories and packed with protein." Additionally, there is a picture and descriptor of each ingredient in the sandwich. This is much different than the scale of what McDonalds falls into, however, it proves the model of expensive versus inexpensive menus. This shift shows McDonalds trying to promise a high-dining experience with much lower prices, however, customers are not fooled by this change. The ingredients do not come from the organic farmer's markets or high-end sources like other establishments who use this form do; but we can give them some credit for trying.

**Sources.**

Bar Cote (Ethiopian) Menu

<https://themenustar1.com/webpace/menus.php?code=orderbarcoteethiopianrestaurant.com>

Cheese n Stuff (American) Menu [https://www.yelp.com/biz\\_photos/cheese-n-stuff-](https://www.yelp.com/biz_photos/cheese-n-stuff-berkeley?select=VxgRCU0n-nITViv1Y0iSVg)

[berkeley?select=VxgRCU0n-nITViv1Y0iSVg](https://www.yelp.com/biz_photos/cheese-n-stuff-berkeley?select=VxgRCU0n-nITViv1Y0iSVg)

Chez Panisse (American) Menu [http://www.chezpanisse.com/menus/restaurant-](http://www.chezpanisse.com/menus/restaurant-menu/?doing_wp_cron=1556993139.7281630039215087890625)

[menu/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1556993139.7281630039215087890625](http://www.chezpanisse.com/menus/restaurant-menu/?doing_wp_cron=1556993139.7281630039215087890625)

Gather (American) Menu <https://www.gatherrestaurant.com/kitchen>

Great China (Chinese) Menu <https://www.greatchinaberkeley.com/dinner>

Jupiter (American) Menu <http://www.jupiterbeer.com/food#menu>

Jurafsky, Dan. *The Language of Food: a Linguist Reads the Menu*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2015.

Ken's Sushi (Japanese) Menu [https://www.yelp.com/biz\\_photos/kens-japanese-restaurant-rancho-cucamonga?tab=menu](https://www.yelp.com/biz_photos/kens-japanese-restaurant-rancho-cucamonga?tab=menu)

King Dong (Chinese) Menu <https://www.kingdong-restaurant.com/>

McDonald's (American) Menu <https://www.mcdonalds.com/us/en-us/full-menu.html>

Tacos Sinaloa (Mexican) Menu [https://www.yelp.com/biz\\_photos/tacos-sinaloa-berkeley?tab=menu](https://www.yelp.com/biz_photos/tacos-sinaloa-berkeley?tab=menu)