



HAS EVERYONE DECIDED?

How to make incredible food,
a crowd-pleasing menu, and a
little money, all at the same time.

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Photo Credit: Matt Hays



MAPPING YOUR MENU

Great restaurant menus have to be exciting, realistic, and profitable all at once. Not easy. As the Executive Chef at Adalina, I brought ingredients and techniques from my travels, my grandmother's traditional kitchen, and childhood snacks to add a twist to traditional cuisine. Creativity is a big part of it. But so is the striving—the work is never complete. Ingredients can always be tweaked, the process can always be adjusted. A great menu will always evolve.

Now I'm a partner at Adalina Prime and we're operating a different kind of steakhouse. It all begins with the menu. Creating a menu is never a straight path. There are so many ways to get it right (and a few ways to get it wrong). Here's a little bit on my philosophy behind creating a great menu—which, of course, is subject to change.

TO MAKE IT DIFFERENT, COOK WHAT YOU LOVE

No matter your concept, guests are going to show up with expectations of your restaurant's menu: the dishes, the ingredients, even the plating. Not every menu needs to reinvent the wheel. But a thoughtful, creative menu can influence the whole restaurant (as a chef, maybe I'm biased). A creative menu is part of what gets people through the door—it's marketing. So every operator needs to think: how are we going to be different?

When we started developing the menu for Adalina Prime, we wanted to create menu items that we love to eat and cook. We kept the classic steakhouse sides—mashed potatoes, brussels sprouts, asparagus—and used ingredients like panko, hot honey, preserved lemon, that add unexpected to the familiar.

Certain concepts come with rigid expectations. But by breaking from these expectations, you can incorporate what you love about cooking and restaurants while finding a new audience. Who says a steakhouse can't have just as many vegetarian and seafood entrees as steaks? Mac and cheese can't be Tteok-Bokki?





HUNT



GATHER



CATCH

Photo Credit: Matt Hass

CREATE SECTIONS, CREATE BALANCE

A cohesive menu has balance. To me, that means six people with different diets can share a table and have a great time. But it also means guests can come back multiple times a week and get something completely different.

Creating distinct menu categories—like our hunt, gather, catch—can help you see whether your menu has balance. It also helps with the design of your physical menu, when you get there (but that should be the last thing you worry about—literally, in order, that’s the final one).

I look not only at the number of items, but the variety of items. Most steakhouse menus are repetitive: baked potato, mashed potato, fried potato. We may not have as many items on the menu as other steakhouses, but we still have just as much or more variety. This variety—an extensive menu beyond the steak-and-potato norm—felt risky at first. We’re asking people to come in and enjoy foods they typically don’t find at a steakhouse. But I believe our willingness to try something new pays off.

CONSIDER PRESENTATION

You can't compensate for mediocrity by making it beautiful. But as you're developing your menu, you need a clear vision of what your dishes will look like. To some extent, we eat with our eyes. It's also one of the ways you can communicate value.

One example is our lobster pot pie. We put a lot of thought into the presentation before putting it on the menu. We tested out different crusts, different sauces—even different proteins. Our final presentation includes the lobster head, so people know they're getting the whole lobster. We're playing with a traditional presentation of the lobster, and fusing it with the humble Midwestern pot pie.

Another way to think about presentation: you can have fun with it. Our caviar service comes with an optional add-on of house-made chicken nuggets, served in a custom cardboard box. I've always been drawn to pairing the most luxurious items with more approachable, familiar items. The chicken nugget packaging draws attention to this, and shows how you can still have fun in the kitchen. We riffed on the deep fried onion—a steakhouse classic. But in our version, we peel the fine film on each onion layer to make sure the breading stays on during the frying process. It's familiar, but luxurious (and a little bit tedious).



DON'T SHY AWAY FROM HIGH-DEMAND ITEMS

When you're opening a new concept, it's always going to take some time to get to know your guests and what's resonating on your menu. No matter your concept, you can't go wrong sourcing high-quality, local ingredients.

We wanted three different wagyu programs: one Australian, one Japanese, and one domestic. I found a wagyu farm local in Illinois and the samples were amazing. So we went all in and bought out all their cows—and their future cows. Once we run out of those steaks, that's it. And that's the point.

ALLOW YOUR MENU TO EVOLVE BASED ON PICKUPS

As you get closer to opening, you're going to have to roll with the punches and expect your menu to evolve. The dishes and techniques you love are going to bump into the operational realities of the kitchen.

Cooking something you love for yourself is different than cooking it for 300 people. So give yourself time to get it right on the line. It might mean saving certain dishes for when you can execute perfectly, instead of serving them at your grand opening.

With that in mind, I always try to keep some aces up my sleeve. We'll get the kitchen and dining room operations figured out, then showcase some new menu items when we're ready for it.



THE FLAVORS WORK. DOES THE MATH?

Once you've found your flavors and techniques, you need to consider whether a menu item is financially viable. This is when it's time to say goodbye, however painful it can be. We removed turbot in caviar sauce from our final menu, because between the fish and labor, it would need to be priced at \$120 per plate. Not feasible.

There are a few other tools at your disposal. I always wanted to put three of the most luxurious ingredients—wagyu, truffle, and foie gras—in one bite. We made it an amuse bouche, so it becomes a little luxury. It may not be profitable on its own, but it draws in guests who will order more profitable dishes and make up for the high cost item on the aggregate. Menu profitability is a give-and-take. The high-commodity side dishes made with widely available items offset the crab legs and steak cuts that fluctuate in price and availability. Variety and flexibility make your menu sustainable.



ACCEPT THE NON-LINEAR

Sometimes it'll take us weeks and weeks to come up with a menu item. You're working on a menu item for years and then you're sipping coffee on a fall afternoon and realize the missing piece. Some menu items come to life in 45 minutes. Inspiration can come from a color, a smell, a sound. You find a broad picture and then you try to fill in the details.

I hate to say it, but it doesn't get any easier. I find it gets a little harder the more you do it, as you keep trying to push boundaries of menu creation. But I can't put into words how satisfying the process is. Creating something out of nothing? It's a lot of fun.





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