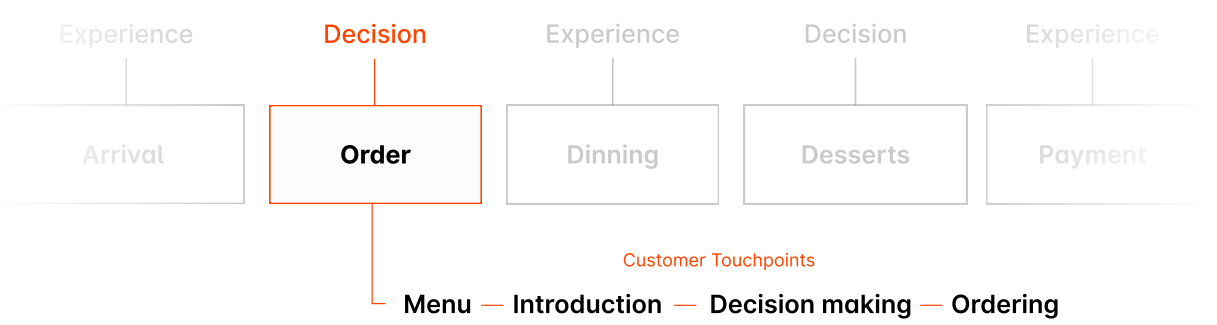
THE POWER OF MENU DESIGN

Introduction

Restaurants often have beautifully designed menus created by designers, but they frequently overlook the psychological and behavioral aspects that influence guest decisions. The result is a visually appealing menu that isn't necessarily effective.

Menu design is a crucial part of the dining experience and a key driver of restaurant performance. It defines most of the guest's experience and determines their spending decisions at the very moment of ordering.



A well structured menu guides guests naturally, aligning their desires with the restaurant's goals. By reducing cognitive load through clear layouts, concise descriptions, and thoughtful hierarchy, it adds an emotional layer that helps guests decide faster and more impulsively — driven by emotion rather than rationality, and it's simply increase spend per head.

Aligning menu structure and strategy with waiter guidance can increase menu efficiency even further. Together, they form a powerful system that directs attention toward profitable and complementary dishes, ensuring that guests experience the restaurant at its best while enhancing both satisfaction and overall revenue.

Demonstration of Applying UX Principles to Restaurant Menus

An in-depth analysis of Grana's menu, identifying visual and structural patterns that shape how guests read, choose, and spend — and showing how small design improvements can meaningfully enhance both guest satisfaction and business performance.

CURRENT MENU DESIGN

GRANA

BREAD & DAIRY

House Made sourdough **ciabatta**, parmesan butter 6pp
Milled onsite with heritage grains from Gunnedah
Add butter di fichi 2

Crescenza **focaccia** di recco, olive oil 18
Stracchino cheese in thin layers of olive oil bread
Add prosciutto 15
Add truffle salami 16

Crostini, goats curd, Sicilian olives, black garlic 12ea
Charred ciabatta, whipped goats curd

Burrata, figs, blood plums, saffron pickled fennel, basil 29
Mozzarella pocket filled with cow's milk cream
Add prosciutto 7.5

Stracciatella, persimmon, heirloom tomatoes, romesco, walnut, vincotto 30
Thin strands of hand pulled mozzarella

PASTA

SEAFOOD

Freshly shucked **oysters,** italian mignonette, lemon 6.85ea
Sydney rock oysters, NSW

Salmon crudo, friggitello vinaigrette, cucumber, caper, gremolata 35
Marlborough, NZ

Yellowfin **tuna** tartare, Calabrian chilli aioli, eggplant caponata, pane carasau 34
Bermagui, NSW

Charred **octopus**, almond, green chilli, salmoriglio, lemon 34
Fremantle, WA

Butterflied king **prawns,** citrus aioli, finger lime & chilli salmoriglio 44
Mooloolabah, QLD

Crispy skin **barramundi**, acqua pazza brodetto, shaved calamari, fennel risoni 47
Humpty Doo, NT

MEAT

Smoked raw **beef**, black garlic, pecorino, tomato jelly, pasta fritta 34
Glen Innes, NSW

Chicken cotoletta piccata, capers, lemon, green olives, broadleaf rocket, parmesan 45
Spicer's Creek, NSW

Borrowdale **pork** tomahawk**,** mustard crema, fennel salad 59
Hollisdale, NSW

Glazed **lamb** shoulder, pesto rosso, grilled roma beans, salsa verde 54/ 98
Margra Lamb, Oberon, NSW

400g grain-fed **scotch fillet,** marsala jus, confit garlic, salsa cruda 69
Riverina District, NSW

O'connor premium Gippsland **bistecca**, rosemary, garlic, mustard MP

Capelli, broccoli, lemon, chilli, pangrattato 28
Thin strands of "angel hair" egg dough
Add spanner crab 16

Ricotta spiral **ravioli**, warm honey butter, kale, pecorino 35
Hand filled egg yolk ravioli

Conchiglie, brodo di pesce, king prawn, zucchini, aleppo pepper, basil 42
Hand pressed "seashell" shaped pasta

Gigli, nduja butter, speck, goats cheese, garlic pangratatto 38
Hand pressed "bellflower" shaped pasta
Add crispy pancetta 7.5

Rigatoni, pollo & fennel ragu bianco, rapini, pesto genovese, aged parmesan 39
Hand pressed short, wide, tube shaped pasta

House made daily, on-site
Gluten Free Pasta available

Market fish, sweet corn, finger lime butter MP

MARKET

Red baby **cos**, Italian dressing, pecorino, pangrattato 14

Roasted **cauliflower**, golden raisins, stracchino, pepitas 24
Add prosciutto 7.5

Handcut **chips**, spicy sour cream 17

Charred **broccoli** salad, smoked almond, lemon, ricotta, aged parmesan 18

Burnt caraflex **cabbage**, mushroom, basil butter, herbs 26

Take our bread home 12
House baked daily

GRANA.SYDNEY

AFTER

Dulce de leche and mascarpone **cannolo** 12

Grana Tiramisu 21

Strawberry **pavlova**, white chocolate, balsamic, black pepper and tonka bean 19
vegan +3

Torta di ricotta, plum compote 23
(Please allow 15 minutes cooking time)

Rocher, hazelnut diplomat, chocolate crumble, chocolate gelato, coco pops 24

Stracciatella gelato **affogato** 11
Add macadamia liquor 9

Grana **cheese**, preserves, lavosh 42

A 3% gratuity applies to all dine-in bills, removable upon request.
10% service charge replaces the gratuity for groups of 8 or more.
15% surcharge applies to all bills on Public Holidays. Sunday surcharge is 10%.

MENU PROBLEMS.

Lack of clear distinction between starters and mains

Waitstaff need to explain where the starters and mains are located on the menu, which consumes a significant amount of time during service in an extremely busy restaurant.

Impact: *This significantly increases the time required to introduce the menu and staff have less opportunity to recommend or promote specific dishes, which reduces spending.*

Menu structure not aligned with diners dinning flow

The current menu layout lacks logical sequencing and goes against the generally accepted dining flow (Starters → Mains → Desserts). Guests get confused and must invest additional effort to navigate it.

Impact: *While deciding what to order, the menu demands greater cognitive effort, reducing spontaneous decision making and decreasing the likelihood of impulsive purchases.*

Poor menu scannability and readability

A noisy typographic layout, lack of alignment, and uneven line lengths reduce readability.

Impact: *Reduced readability increases cognitive load and slows down decision making - all lowering overall menu efficiency.*

There is no clear distinction between premium and regular dishes.

Impact: Premium dishes don't stand out as signature experiences, making them difficult to identify within the menu. As a result, customers miss higher value options or fail to perceive their elevated quality.

MENU IMPROVEMENTS.

NEW MENU DESIGN

GRANA

BREAD & DAIRY

House Made sourdough **ciabatta**, parmesan butter 6pp
Milled onsite with heritage grains from Gunnedah.
+ butter di fichi 2

Crescenza **focaccia** di recco, olive oil 18
Stracchino cheese in thin layers of olive oil bread.
+ prosciutto 15

Crostini, goats curd, Sicilian olives, black garlic 12ea
Charred ciabatta, whipped goats curd.

Burrata, figs, blood plums, saffron pickled fennel, basil 29
Mozzarella pocket filled with cow's milk cream.
+ prosciutto 7.5

Stracciatella, persimmon, heirloom tomatoes, romesco, walnut, vincotto 30
Thin strands of hand pulled mozzarella.

STARTERS

Freshly shucked **oysters**, Italian mignonette, lemon 6.85
Sydney rock oysters, NSW.

Salmon crudo, friggitello vinaigrette, cucumber, caper, gremolata 35
Marlborough, NZ.

Yellowfin **tuna** tartare, Calabrian chilli aioli, eggplant caponata, pane carasau 34
Bermagui, NSW.

Smoked raw **beef** tartare, black garlic, pecorino, tomato jelly, pasta fritta 29
Glen Innes, NSW.

Charred **octopus**, almond, green chilli, salmoriglio, lemon 34
Fremantle, WA.

Butterflied king **prawns**, citrus aioli, finger lime & chilli salmoriglio 44
Mooloolabah, QLD.

PASTA

Conchiglie, brodo di pesce, king prawn, zucchini, aleppo pepper, basil 47
Hand pressed "seashell" shaped pasta.

Ricotta spiral **ravioli**, warm honey butter, kale, pecorino 35
Hand filled egg yolk ravioli.

Gigli, nduja butter, speck, goats cheese, garlic, pangrattato 38
Hand pressed "bellflower" shaped pasta.
+ crispy pancetta 7.5

Rigatoni, pollo & fennel ragu bianco, rapini, pesto genovese, aged parmesan 39
Hand pressed short, wide, tube shaped pasta.

Capelli, broccoli, lemon, chilli, pangrattato 28
Thin strands of "angel hair" egg dough.
+ spanner crab 16

MAINS

Chicken cotoletta piccata, capers, lemon, green olives, broadleaf rocket, parmesan 45
Spicer's Creek, NSW.

Glazed **lamb** shoulder, pesto rosso, salsa verde grilled roma beans 54 / 98
Hollisdale, NSW.

Crispy skin **barramundi**, acqua pazza brodetto, shaved calamari, fennel risoni 47
Riverina District, NSW.

400g grain-fed **scotch fillet**, marsala jus, confit garlic, salsa cruda 69
Margra Lamb, Oberon, NSW.

Borrowdale **pork** tomahawk, mustard crema, fennel salad 59
Spicer's Creek, NSW

SPECIALS

O'Connor premium Gippsland **bistecca**, rosemary, garlic, mustard MP
Spicer's Creek, NSW.

Market fish, sweet corn, finger lime butter MP
Humpty Doo, NT.

MARKET

Charred **broccoli** salad, smoked almond, lemon, ricotta, aged parmesan 18
Humpty Doo, NT.

Roasted **cauliflower**, golden raisins, stracchino, pepitas 24

Red baby **cos**, Italian dressing, pecorino, pangrattato 14
Spicer's Creek, NSW.

Handcut **chips**, spicy sour cream 17

Burnt caraflex **cabbage**, mushroom, basil butter, herbs 26
Humpty Doo, NT.

AFTER

Dulce de leche and mascarpone **cannolo** 12
Thin strands of "angel hair" egg dough.

Rocher, hazelnut diplomat, chocolate crumble, chocolate gelato, coco pops 23

Grana **tiramisu** 21
Spicer's Creek, NSW.

Strawberry **pavlova**, white chocolate, balsamic, black pepper and tonka bean 23
Vegan option +3

Stracciatella gelato **affogato** 12
Please allow 15 minutes cooking time
+ macadamia liquor 9

Grana **cheese**, preserves, lavosh 42
Please allow 15 minutes cooking time

A 3% gratuity applies to all dine-in bills, removable upon request. 10% service charge replaces the gratuity for groups of 8 or more.
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Menu Structure & Ordering Flow

Introduced clear "Starters" and "Mains" sections and reorganized all categories to follow the natural dining sequence at restaurant (Bread → Starters → Pasta → Mains → After). This makes the menu intuitive, clear, and self explanatory.

Impact: *It reduces cognitive effort when making decisions, increase the likelihood of impulsive ordering and makes decision making faster. Additionally, the change saves waitstaff time, allowing them to focus more on recommendations, specials, or guiding customers to the desired direction, which improves upselling effectiveness and overall conversational flow at the table.*

Enhanced Readability and Scannability

Improved typographic hierarchy and content alignment to reduce visual noise and enhance scannability.

Impact: Improved readability under ambient restaurant lighting, enabling faster scanning and reducing cognitive load. Clear distinction of "add-ons" ensures they are easily noticed and not overlooked by customers.

* Prices were offset rather than perfectly aligned in order to encouraging guests to read dishes from name → description → price, instead of scanning numbers vertically. This layout helps diners form an emotional connection with the dishes before evaluating cost.

Better Distinction of Premium Dishes

Impact: *Elevated perceived quality of premium dishes, making them easier to locate and more attractive for upselling.*

EXTRAS.

UX microcopy

The restaurant already applies this technique on a few items in the menu, like ciabatta and capelli, demonstrating its potential to enhance perception and stimulate appetite. Expanding UX copy across the entire menu would create a more cohesive brand voice and help guests visualize flavor, texture, and origin, strengthening emotional engagement and perceived value.

Anchoring pricing

In the Pasta sections, prices were arranged using anchoring principles as an example of how layout can influence guest choices. The higher priced dishes are positioned first, making surrounding options appear more affordable. This leads guests to subconsciously compare and often choose the “reasonable” mid option, and it’s typically neither the most expensive nor the cheapest. This kind of menu items placement helps increase conversions on high margin dishes.

Final thoughts

Every restaurant has its own identity, but the principles of good menu design remain universal. A menu isn’t just a list of dishes — it’s a behavioral tool that shapes how guests explore, choose, and spend. When structured with intention, it becomes an extension of service itself — guiding decisions subtly, supporting upselling naturally, and creating a smoother dining flow.

Designing with UX principles allows restaurants to connect guest psychology with business strategy. It ensures the experience feels effortless while driving measurable performance outcomes. The most effective menus are not only beautiful but smart — balancing aesthetics, clarity, and strategy to serve both the guest and the restaurant’s goals.