

“Make sure that they can be produced consistently in the hustle and bustle of a busy kitchen”



THE MARKETEEER
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Nothing more constant than change

The Marketeer asks casual dining operators how often they should change their menu

I was having an interesting conversation the other day with a friend of mine who was bemoaning the fact that her local supermarket had moved everything around and things weren't where she expected them to be. Of course, there is nothing new about this, with it being widely recognised as a tried and tested way for supermarkets to encourage shoppers to change the way they shop.

Whether we like to admit it or not, a lot of us are creatures of habit and we are often on autopilot when we do our weekly shop. A consequence of this is that there are often a number of aisles which we never venture down, as they are not part of our regular pattern of shopping.

Indeed, as someone who often shops from a list, I realised there were parts of the store that I completely ignore. For many people that's just fine, but for others it means that what they may see as 'routine' is in actual fact more of a 'rut'. It can often mean that they miss out on the chance to try or experience new and different products. The key question for retailers is how often should they change their store layout? For many it is a fine balance between moving things around to break

habits and routines versus making changes that annoy customers such as my friend, who prefer things to stay as they are.

This challenge versus the status quo is not unique to just supermarkets. When it comes to the world of casual dining, one of the most frequent questions I get asked is how often should I change my menu?

HORSES FOR COURSES

As you would expect, there is no simple answer to when or how often a pub or restaurant should change its menu. In some cases the driver for change could be location; it could be the types of customers you attract or would like to attract; and whether you have a particular image or theme you are trying to project. A venue that prides itself on selling fresh ingredients will always have more licence to change than a business that's built around more traditional comfort foods.

There are extremes at both ends of the spectrum. National pub chains that operate standard menus across hundreds of pubs with printed menus are unlikely to amend their main offerings more than once or twice a year. In contrast, independently run pubs and restaurants,



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especially those with a strong kitchen set-up, will often change their menus on a monthly or even weekly basis.

Changing your menu on a more frequent basis helps keep things fresh for regular customers as well as having the advantage of being able to tailor your menu around things which are in season, which should in turn help to keep costs down. However, just to change your menu for the sake of it can be more damaging than not changing it at all. The key for operators and chefs alike is to be very clear on what is driving you to make changes.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Two of the main reasons why changing menus can take so much time is that new items need to be fully costed and dishes need to be tested. When I say 'tested', I don't just mean perfected in terms of taste and presentation – they also need to be tested to make sure that they can be produced consistently in the hustle and bustle of a busy kitchen.

Regardless of what type of restaurant you run, it is always best to use whatever is in season, at least for part of your menu. This doesn't necessarily mean a complete

overhaul – it just might require you to adapt your menu and your dishes to take advantage of what is likely to be in plentiful supply and therefore cheaper. As well as seasonal ingredients, it's also good to look to source as much as you can from local producers and suppliers.

It is also vitally important that you keep in touch on a regular basis with how costs may be changing. When prices start to creep up either through inflation or shortages, dishes that were once profitable may become less so. Cost should always be a key factor when a pub or a restaurant plans its menus; if margins are being squeezed, then it's important that you adapt your dishes accordingly. Finally, at the heart of any menu change should be what your diners want.

NOT JUST ABOUT FOOD

When considering changes to your food menu, it's also worth looking at your drinks offer. I am frequently amazed as to how little thought seems to go into changing what can often be a key driver of footfall and profit. As with food, it's not always about wholesale changes but simply ensuring that you evolve your offer to suit

the seasons, different trends and look to keep the offer fresh.

While changing some draught products may be difficult due to supply contracts, most outlets have more flexibility and scope than they realise. This is especially true when it comes to packaged beer and cider, wines and spirits, and cocktails. It's well recognised that many customers love to 'eat with the seasons', so why not drink with them as well? As we approach summer, offering drinks that capture the mood are more likely to sell than those that remind customers of colder times. Try and think of your drinks offer as an ever-evolving entity. It is something that constantly needs to be managed and updated. As the seasons change, so should your drinks offer. While your core offer will most likely stay the same, ensuring that well-loved favourites remain available all year round, don't underestimate the fun and excitement that you can generate by featuring drinks with a more seasonal association too. ☺