

MANAGING THE MENU

Rein in your labor and food costs by maximizing efficiencies and controlling inventory
// By Jody Shee

Your business blood pressure rises with every elevated food cost, delinquent delivery and unskilled employee incident. You need a good dose of something. There are many ways to handle this trifecta of business challenges but consider a path to profitability through menu management strategies



From left: ACF Chef Melinda Burrows, CEC, CCA, executive chef at Hickory Hills Country Club, Springfield, Missouri; ACF Chef Rena Frost, chef/owner of ReWard Restaurant Group, Inc., Coffeyville, Texas

that help to maximize efficiencies. Here are 10 tips and tricks tried and suggested by your colleagues.

Make smart substitutions. In a fluctuating chicken-tenders market, **ACF Chef Melinda Burrows, CEC, CCA**, executive chef at Hickory Hills Country Club in Springfield, Missouri, was forced to go with chicken breasts, which became transformational. “Now we are getting 5-ounce boneless skinless chicken breasts and cutting them in two, which is the same as two chicken tenders

but without having to cut the tendon. We are saving money on the product and saving labor dollars on processing, so it’s a win-win,” she says.

Cross-utilize more ingredients.

The goal of using every product many ways is to get maximum usage and yield leading to zero waste, Chef Burrows says.



Chef Cesar Zapata, chef/co-owner of Vietnamese-Cajun fusion concept Phuc Yea in Miami, sees it that way, too. “If I have a spring roll, I use the ground pork and shrimp mixture with a few different ingredients and make dumplings out of it,” he says. “Same thing with short ribs. I use the trimmings in dumplings or hash for brunch.”

At ReWard Restaurant Group, Inc., in Coffeyville, Texas, when **ACF Chef/Owner Rena Frost** brings in certain in-season fish for entrees, she’ll use any leftovers for other parts of the menu. For example, when fresh trout stars on the menu at either of her two restaurants, she’ll feature a smoked trout dip appetizer as a special to keep the inventory moving.

Consider cutbacks. Rethink the expensive premium items on the menu. Prior to pandemic and supply woes, Chef Zapata offered two or three steak options



From left: The trout dip appetizer appears on the menu at Mac's on Main when fish is brought in for an entree. The smoked trout dip contains sherry vinegar, Dijon mustard, fresh garlic and egg yolks and is served with caper chimichurri drizzled on top and grilled French baguettes; When crab becomes too expensive, chefs at ReWard Restaurant Group take popular crab cakes off the menu, knowing guests wouldn't want to pay what they would be required to if crab cakes were on the menu; Michigan State University purchases vegetable blends to negate backend labor. Below: ACF Chef Kurt Kwiatkowski, CEC, CCA, AAC, corporate executive chef at Michigan State University in East Lansing.

on the menu. Now he's down to one. He also eliminated duck in favor of chicken.

During the pandemic, Chef Frost eliminated the Sunday brunch fresh fruit and salad bar simply to cut back on waste. She never added it back, and though guests miss it, she can no longer justify the surplus, she says.

The idea of eliminating ingredients challenges your concept and values. Sometimes there is no compromise. For example, when the sunflower oil shortage hit, along with increased product and shipping costs, Chef Burrows had to ask, "Will I stop using that? No. We will pay the cost to get that wonderful oil. That item I'm passionate about," she says.

Consult more vendors. Supply shortages made business as usual with



the same small group of vendors nearly impossible for Chef Frost. "Instead of one vendor and a backup, I have two more backups, so one main vendor and three and maybe a fourth for grocery items," she says. As a result, she's become more of a price shopper.

Price shopping takes more of the kitchen manager's time. It can take four hours instead of one, "but it's helped us keep the higher costs down," Chef Frost says.

Curtail excess customization.

Customization is standard operations for fast casual eateries, as well as food stations in universities. However, **ACF Chef Kurt Kwiatkowski, CEC, CCA, AAC**, corporate executive chef at Michigan State University in East Lansing, has had to make tweaks to



Chef Cesar Zapata, co-owner of Vietnamese-Cajun fusion concept Phuc Yea, Miami

the customization he offers to save on labor. Previously, guests visiting the wok station could choose individual vegetables to go into their bowl, along with an assortment of sauces and grains. “Now they can choose from two styles of vegetables, rice, a protein and one of two sauces. We had to streamline how we do that, which leads to less customization,” he says. In the give and take, he emphasizes the importance of good cooking practices like grilling and sauteing. Purchasing pre-cut vegetable blends like broccoli, snow peas, red pepper and red onions has also helped deal with labor issues.

Incorporate more street food.

Menuing street food hits on two cylinders: While it introduces trending global flavors, it’s also inherently simple and cheap to produce, Chef Kwiatkowski says. One such example is El Salvadorian pupusas, corn

pancakes with various toppings. Chef Kwiatkowski offers one containing only a 1/2-ounce of ground cooked chorizo and a tablespoon of shredded cheese to boost flavor with limited costs.

Another street food go-to at Michigan State University is the Malaysian street food roti john, which is essentially an omelet sandwich. “It’s quick [and cheap] to put together; we use precooked pork, a hot dog bun and scrambled eggs,” he says.

Make sides a la carte. To make up some margins, Phuc Yea’s Chef Zapata redid his popular short rib dish. Instead of offering a composed dish with ribs and two sides, each item is now sold individually. “That way I could justify the cost of the dish,” he says. Currently, the menu lists smoked short ribs with a notation to add steamed bao buns for \$7 and homemade pickles for \$7. He says he charges a little less than previously for the short ribs, but he



more than makes up the cost if the guest orders the a la carte sides.

Change certain cooking styles. In a climate of unskilled labor, Chef Zapata has found simpler cooking methods without sacrificing flavor or quality. “Until I train them, [some] cooks don’t know medium rare or medium steak temperatures,” he says. To get around this, Chef Zapata will pre-smoke the steaks and allow staff to sous vide them to medium rare, which takes the guesswork out of the equation. After removing steaks from the bag, cooks season them, sear them in a hot cast iron skillet to get a crust, rest them, then slice.

Chef Zapata notes that smoking chicken, riblets and pork shoulders is less labor-intensive than other cooking methods. “We smoke cook them first, let them rest overnight, cut into chunks the



Left: Ingredients in Phuc Yea restaurant’s dumplings are cross-utilized with other menu items; Above: The sides served with the short ribs at Miami’s Phuc Yea restaurant are now ordered and charged a la carte.

next day and throw them into the fryer,” he says.

Purchase supplier overages.

Often meat purveyors run specials on items not moving through the warehouse fast enough or on various frozen items, Chef Zapata says. He asks for those items. “On a weekly basis, they send me things they need to move or that they have on special. I order them and put them on the menu as a special.”

Double-check all costs. Don’t automatically trust the suppliers’ prices and bookwork. “I check pricing and my invoices almost daily to make sure my purveyors aren’t increasing my prices. Then I call them if they are,” Chef Zapata says. “If there’s no reasonable excuse, because I know how commodities are going in the market, they tell me they are sorry and adjust the price. Or I lock down prices for a month or two. Then I don’t have those issues. You have to be on it.”

In today’s climate, with rising food and labor costs, the key to menu and inventory management remains steadfast on the will and wherewithal to make careful, creative substitutions and eliminations, reduce waste and hold your ground.