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Can historians order off the menu?: A method for historical menu analysis

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Abstract

While historians have used menus to tell part of the histories of restaurants, little guidance has been provided on how we should approach these unique culinary documents. This lack of instruction becomes more apparent in light of the impressive amount of archival work and digitization of historical menus done in recent years. As a response, this article presents a method that I have developed for analyzing menus. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives as well as experience teaching and researching with menus, this method recognizes menus as documents that can reveal the many relationships and connections intersecting in, flowing through, and making up restaurants. This method is divided into four steps: 1) (Un)Identifiable details; 2) Logics/story; 3) Mess or Marginalia; and 4) Cross-Menu comparison. By moving the reader through the method and offering an example of historical menu analysis, this article demonstrates some of the many historical insights that emerge through careful consideration of these sources.

Keywords: Menus; food history; primary source analysis; Asian Canadian studies; interdisciplinarity

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Résumé

Les historiens utilisent les menus pour raconter une partie de l'histoire des restaurants, mais jusqu'ici, peu d'indications ont été données sur la manière d'aborder ces documents culinaires uniques. Cette lacune devient plus évidente encore avec l'impressionnant travail d'archivage et de numérisation des menus historiques réalisé ces dernières années. En guise de réponse, cet article présente une méthode que j'ai développée pour analyser les menus. S'appuyant sur des perspectives interdisciplinaires ainsi que sur une expérience de l'enseignement et de la recherche dans le domaine des menus, cette méthode considère les menus comme des documents susceptibles de révéler les nombreux liens et rapports qui s'entremêlent dans les restaurants, qui les traversent et les constituent. Cette méthode est divisée en quatre étapes : 1) les détails (non) identifiables ; 2) la logique / l'histoire ; 3) le désordre ou les notes marginales ; et 4) la comparaison entre les menus. En guidant le lecteur ou la lectrice à travers la méthode et en proposant un exemple d'analyse de menu historique, cet article démontre quelques-unes des nombreuses informations historiques qui ressortent d'un examen attentif de ces sources.

Introduction

Scribbles of a flying reindeer pulling a sleigh, a nose embellished with lines and the word "GLOWS" underlined two times, a house with an arrow pointing to the north pole, dates such as July 4th and December 24th/25th, all garnished with what appear to be grease stains: these are part of a collection of images, diagrams, and short phrases found on the back of a Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) menu, offering what seems to be a fairly thorough explanation of American holiday lore. Before we cast this menu aside, as the restaurateur and diner probably intended, we flip the menu to its front and notice that this KFC menu did not come from the possibly assumed franchise in the United States but rather from a location in Beijing, China (*美国肯德基家乡鸡菜谱Menu*, n.d.).

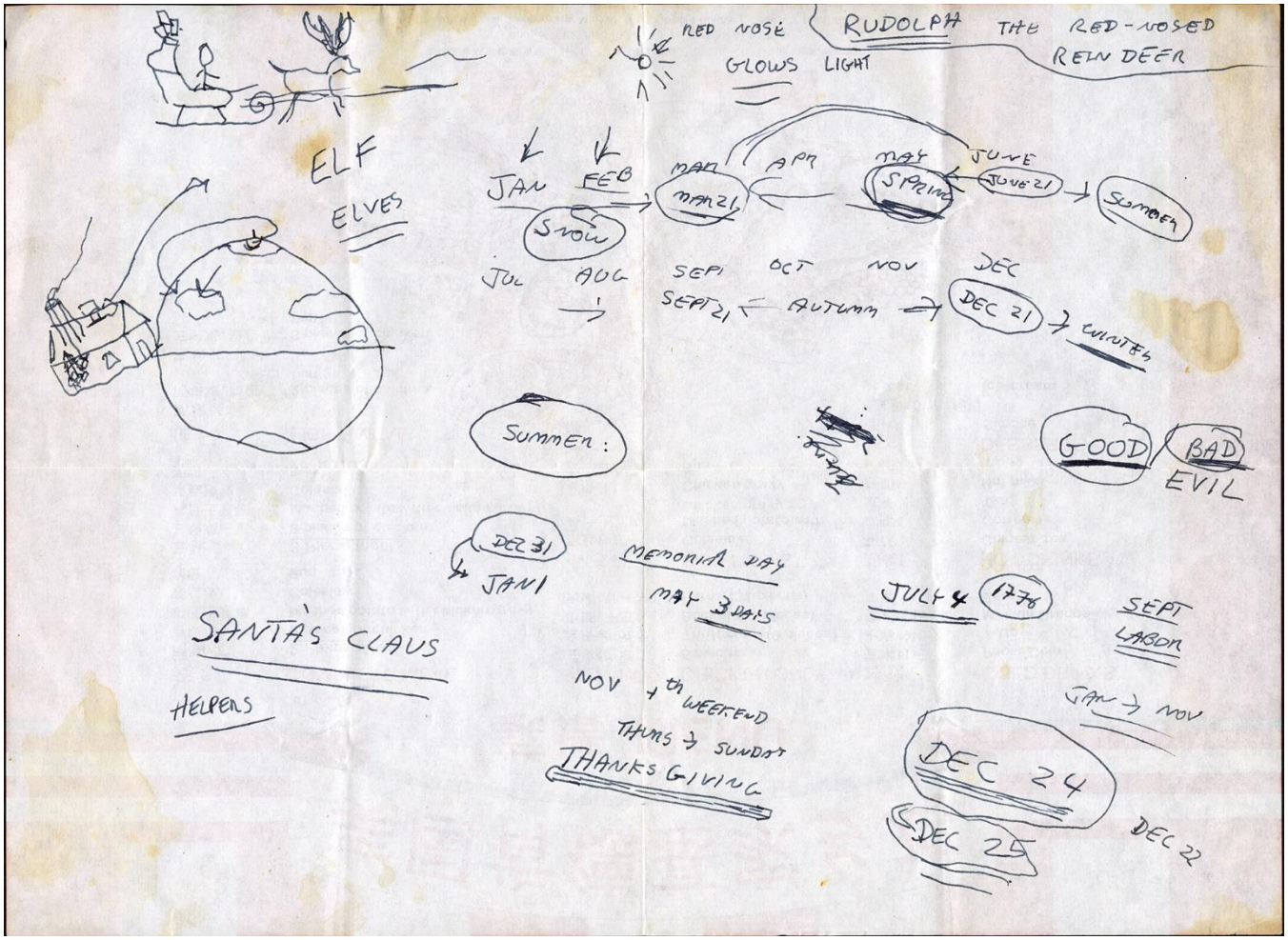
This is one of my favourite menus from the Harley J. Spiller collection, currently housed at the University of Toronto Scarborough, because it reminds us of the many conversations that occur over restaurant tables. The doodles evoke questions about this interaction between an impromptu menu cartoonist and whoever they dined with. Why did this knowledge sharing occur? Was/were the individual(s) they were dining with interested or confused? Did they have a good idea about American holidays by the end of it? Did the KFC's location prompt this conversation? Did they feel closer together after the drawings were finished? These are potentially unanswerable questions of a tantalizing historical moment that sources like this illuminate and provoke. Questions like these represent a familiar frustration to historians who are tasked with interpreting what we can and cannot glean from each primary source.

With examples like this, without a date or any clear indication as to who drew these cartoons or who was there to listen to their explanation, we often have to take the conservative approach and not include these messy drawings within official history. However, as the growing archival presence of menus suggests, many are starting to believe that the record menus leave behind is too good to pass up. This growing archival presence

encourages hope that we will find or create the tools to meaningfully interpret these traces of assumed lost, day-to-day culinary interactions between/amongst diners and restaurateurs. This article and its method add to this effort by arguing that, through investing time and care in analyzing these documents, food historians can find new opportunities to engage with histories and memories of joy, reunion, negotiation, argumentation, and conversation between and amongst diners and restaurateurs.

Using Chinese North American menus, this article provides guidance on how historians may approach analyzing and interpreting historical menus through encouraging contemporary readers and historians to form more conscious and embodied relations to the items they analyze. In this process, this article illuminates how a close reading of menus can not only provide insight into the historical subjectivities of restaurateurs and the worlds and moments they create through their restaurants but also reveal the many intimate relationships formed around the restaurant table.

Figure 1: Back of a menu - University of Toronto Scarborough Library, Archives & Special Collections, Harley Spiller Collection – 1-6



What is [on] a menu? [A literature review]

It would be incorrect to say that menus have not been studied, and it is helpful to the historian to recognize the diverse disciplinary ways these documents have been considered. Scholars and researchers, in hospitality in particular, have produced a robust literature about the thought and business strategy that go into the creation and function of menus (Ozdemir & Caliskan, 2014). Sociologists have used menus to teach and explain social class through coding exercises that pay attention to prices, assumed specialized knowledge, text structure, and design (Wright & Ransom, 2005). Priscilla Ferguson (2005) identified menus, along with meals and markets, as useful categories in identifying the interconnected, convertible, and transformative qualities of food as it navigates the movements from production to consumption, material to symbolic. However, she focused on "menus" as a collection of dishes or food repertoires rather than menus as documents and primary sources which provide unique insight into broader notions of edibility and taste.

Museum studies scholar Irina Mihalache (2016) examined menus in the context of museum restaurants as a way to interrogate the interpretive potentials of food in multisensorial engagements with museum exhibitions, highlighting the ways food can engage communities of visitors through modes of knowledge-making, taste, and culinary encounters. Menu collectors have also thought critically about these documents, seeing menus as "tangible evidence" of the relationships that allow the world to work (Schinto, 2005, p. 74). Harley Spiller (2004), noted Chinese restaurant menu collector, has also shown how menus can help uncover a fuller picture of Chinatown nightclubs in 1930s San Francisco through documenting the food and more importantly drink options that kept patrons dancing through the night. Henry Voigt (n.d.) has also done extensive work uncovering the histories of American menus, revealing how, as he puts it, menus "reflect the aspirations and ideals of society". Chefs themselves also offer insight into the creation and use of menus; for example, celebrated chef Cecilia Chiang (2015) described the detailed ways she developed her menus in response to diners in San Francisco, beginning with around 300 items and whittling them down to the dishes American diners liked.

Two academic disciplines have offered especially helpful guidance to historians in how we might approach this unique type of primary source: linguistics and literary studies. From the field of linguistics, scholars have emphasized the ways menus document the "interconnectedness" of our food through how it is encoded into language. Yao and Su (2019) outlined different perspectives to consider in applied linguistics research, such as how food names might reveal the history of the global economy and language contact and how price information is encoded in the language of restaurant menus. Their work builds on the work of Dan Jurafsky (2014), who used computational linguistic methods among others to explore how this immense "interconnectedness" in the language of food can help us to understand or to question how food has changed between different contexts. As historians, perhaps we can turn to our colleagues in linguistics as a challenge to further enmesh their insights into language within the many aspects that define our existence. In turn, we can see their expansive interconnectedness and careful attention to trends within enviable data sets as inspiration to broaden and more collaboratively situate our historical analyses.

Literary scholars have also led the way in menu analysis by providing modes of close reading that illuminate the potential and possible dynamics

underlying menus. Nathalie Cooke (2021), in her introduction to the Bloomsbury illustrated menu collection, considers how asking the "seemingly simple questions like 'What is a menu? What information does it contain? What does it do?'" can begin to uncover how these pieces of ephemera "convey meaning to the diners of their day as well as to readers and scholars of later generations". Relatedly, Lily Cho's (2010b) argument for a more "agential" reading of small town Chinese Canadian restaurant menus allows us to consider how the menus can illuminate the agency of restaurateurs, where through this document Chinese Canadian restaurateurs are able to participate in "the engineering of a mechanics of incorporation" (pp. 51, 58) and deciding cultural representation. Robert Ji-Song Ku (2014), relatedly, in his discussion of Chinese American restaurant menus, describes how many Chinese restaurants have multiple menus: "an English version for "outsiders," a Chinese version for "insiders," a bilingual menu, a "secret" (i.e., unwritten) menu for the "very" insiders, and so forth" (p. 66). Ku's (2014) observation not only illuminates how menus for some can serve as a *gate* rather than a *guide* to "Authentic" or insider Chinese cuisine but also serves as a critical reminder to the food historian of the multiple positionalities potentially refracted within the menus that remain.

Together, close readings of menus encourage us to consider the ways these primary sources reveal the perspectives of the restaurateurs that created them and the conversations or negotiations between restaurateurs and customers that leave traces on these menus. We can pause to think about how our understandings of menus as "maps," as the French name for menus, *La Carte,* suggests, to the dishes and cuisines featured in a restaurant does not fully capture the amount of work these documents do for restaurateurs and how much they can reveal or obscure to the food historian. While authored and edited by restaurateurs, these documents were created in conversation with multiple actors and entities from diners and chefs to policies and markets. It is the centrality of restaurateurs within menus that provides a critical opportunity to understand how the restaurants produced the settings and atmospheres for diners to form their own worlds and relationships. Menus, then, present a challenging but rewarding historical puzzle that can open up dimensions to the histories of restaurants, reflecting the immense amount of work and networking that restaurateurs do when creating a restaurant.

Food historians have also used menus as part of their analyses. For example, Maria McGrath (2016) followed the ways the Bloodroot restaurant used their menu to embody and practice their radical lesbian ethics and present their challenges to patriarchal, capitalistic, misogynist oppressive systems. Yong Chen (2014) used menus in his discussion of the "authenticity" of Chinese food, including how non-Chinese customers sought it out in the twentieth century as well as how dishes like chop suey, chow mein, and egg foo young fell out of fashion in the Post-War Years. Rebecca Spang (2001), in her foundational history of the French restaurant, also showed how menus "made it possible to imagine a restaurant's limits, extent, and confines" and even "collaps[e] time and space into the restaurant's own never-never land, in a manner that abolished the first and reified the latter" (pp. 190–193). Art historian Alison Pearlman (2018) has also recently offered one of the most comprehensive analyses of menus, focusing on the persuasiveness of menus and how they function as "mediators of the restaurateur-diner relationship" (p. 5). Despite these insightful examples, there has been little direct guidance on how to research and analyze menus as a historian in order to produce work like that done by the historians mentioned in this paragraph.

One very notable exception to this is cultural historian L. Sasha Gora (2022), who has recently provided the most direct and helpful guidance on how to read menus as cultural texts that "frame the relationships between chefs, servers, and diners" (p. 119); Gora (2022) then helpfully asks us to consider questions such as, "what stories does a menu tell about the cuisine it seeks to represent? What language does it use and what knowledge does it assume?" and "why these dishes now?" (p. 119). I whole-heartedly agree with Gora's (2022) framing of menus as relational texts; I turned to menus in my research on Chinese Canadian and Chinese American foodways for exactly this reason, as a unique opportunity to uncover the intercultural relationships between Chinese diasporic restaurateurs and their diverse customers. In many ways, this article and its menu analysis methodology grows in conversation with Gora's (2022) understandings of menus, hoping to provide another form of guidance on how historians can continue to more fully consider the historical knowledge hidden within menus.

The menu analysis methodology presented here builds on Gora's (2022) in a few different ways. For example, instead of asking "how can you look beyond your own appetite in order to read menus as cultural texts?" (p. 119), as Gora (2022) does, this method encourages us to recognize and embrace our appetites as part of historical analysis. Through dimensions of speculation and close analysis, this menu analysis methodology encourages a form of active relationship building between the historian and historical restaurateurs, servers, and diners that works to honor and create a dialogue with the original intents and purposes of these documents. This method also expands on Gora's (2022) analysis by providing more detailed guidance on how to navigate the "challenge to not read menus too literally" (p. 123), as Gora (2022) identifies, by showing especially how one might move between the many details and information on the menu to the more "macro" level analyses and historical conclusions we may draw from them.

Balancing "micro" and "macro" analyses of menus can help us to continually find historical meanings in these documents. Daniel Bender (2023), in his history of "Food Adventurers," briefly draws on menus to trace how hotels and steamships reflected gastro-touristic commitments to "Continental tastes" that "not only refused local ingredients but ignored local culinary traditions and religious prohibitions" (p. 70). Bender (2023) places these menus within broader arguments around global travel and tourism, providing examples of processes where closer attention to menus can provide further insight into the many meals these menus facilitated. For example, we could take the image of the September 2, 1934 menu of the Franconia cruise ship, which Bender (2023) includes in his introduction. Using the menu analysis method outlined in this article, we could pursue future research; for example, paying closer attention to the types of ingredients mentioned on the menu (e.g., loganberry, prime sirloin, spinach, potatoes, French beans) could allow us to think about provisioning of the ship and constructions of culinary imaginaries around "Continental" and global foodways. We could sit with when and how "menu French" appears on the menu, where certain dishes appear in French (e.g., "Mousse de Volaille en Aspic"), in English (e.g., "Prime Sirloin & Ribs of Beef"), or a mix of both (e.g., Noisette of Mutton—Nicoise"), to consider how politics of social class might have been experienced or performed by historical diners. Or, lastly, attention to details like the description found at the bottom of the menu: "Passengers on Special Diet are especially invited to make known their requirements to the Head Waiter," could launch inquiries into whose diets are considered not "special" when read against the dishes that are present on the menu. In this way, the method

outlined in this article aims to provide guidance on how to trace these kinds of connections as well as to encourage us to research along with previous and current food historians as we read and engage with their work (especially if they are generous enough to include images of the menus they reference!).

Hungry in the archive

Especially in the past decade or so, archivists and collectors have amassed, organized, and made available thousands of historical menus (Appendix 1). Many of these North American-based collections have been, or are in the process of being, digitized, meaning that historians have unprecedented access and the ability to analyze a diversity of menus from around the world and across multiple time periods. The menu analysis methodology presented here reflects this accessibility through its fourth step, which challenges historians to notice trends across different menus. We may also consider here not only the roles digital humanities methodologies have played in shaping the ways we interact with menus but also how digital humanities can and will shape our analyses in the future. This is where we can return to the challenges or topics posed by our colleagues in linguistics or sociology and challenge ourselves to think about how our historical questions and answers will change through the way we can access the past.

It is also important to note that menu archives are not new, especially within the realms of hospitality and culinary trade. For example, the Culinary Institute of America's menu collection has been around since at least 1978, and chefs and restaurateurs have been developing personal collections for much longer (the Robert Bon Lee Collection, now housed at the University of Toronto Scarborough, is a great example of one of these). Keeping this context in frame helps us to remember that menus are a culmination of multiple influences and factors and that relationships between seemingly distant menus may not necessarily be coincidental. For this reason, menus should be handled with an open mind that can more fully embrace the agency of those who put these documents together as well as the myriad of connections (between scholars, chefs, librarians, archivists, collectors, and diners) that shaped the eventual configuration of these documents.

One of the most common questions or sentiments I have encountered while researching, teaching, or discussing menus goes along the lines of: "How do you not get hungry while researching?" or "Wow, now I just want Peking duck." Whether historical or contemporary, working with menus often encourages us to interact with them in the ways that the restaurateurs and chefs originally intended. Instead of shying away from our appetites, I suggest that we centre them when analyzing menus. In fact, one of my favourite questions to ask students is, "what would you order?", not because it encourages them to "put themselves in the shoes of historical figures," but because it encourages them to develop a personal relationship with the documents they are interacting with. Unlike more traditional primary sources such as diary entries, newspaper articles, or government documents, which are easier to approach as *distant* documents that we do not have relationships to beyond historical inquiry, we have been conditioned to interact with menus through our own personal tastes, hungers, and desires. This insight is not limited to menus; other

culinary texts like cookbooks and recipes inspire a similar interactivity (Cooke & Lucas, 2017; Driver, 2009; Tompkins, 2013). Perhaps this represents a challenge and an opportunity for food historians to encourage more embodied engagements with the past. To ignore or deny our appetites, I believe, is a missed opportunity to not only promote a historiographical consciousness where our own present being critically informs how we hope to use these sources to uncover specific pasts and write specific histories, but also to encourage more personalized and meaningful connections to the past.

One of the reviewers of this article questioned how far we can take these connections, asking if, with my question of what I mean to "order off" a menu as a historian, I was encouraging readers to partake in "even another layer of engagement by suggesting we find the foods on contemporary menus and try them?" While I surprisingly have not tried this myself, nor have encouraged my students to do so, I do think it might yield interesting reflections. In the future, I look forward to thinking through how engagements with menus might foster meaningful connections with contemporary restaurants and foods that support us (whether we recognize it or not) as we conduct our research. The method outlined below is a beginning to developing even more embodied and relational ways of engaging with menus that open the historian up to the multiple possible insights of menus.

For now, I do encourage researchers to pay attention to your stomach and how these menus draw your attention as you move through the steps outlined below. For example, while identifying the dishes available, take note of which ones you would, or actively would not, like to order, and reflect on why. On the Lichee Garden menu, which is analyzed in more depth later in this article, there are a few dishes described as "balled chicken" that caught my attention and made we wish I could order them now (Lichee Garden, 1955). This allowed for a brief reflection on how I am engaging with these menus through my own curiosity about a Chinese Canadian dish—chicken balls with sweet and sour sauce—and how I might be processing these menus through different ways of engaging with an imagined "Other's" food (Germann Molz, 2007; hooks, 1992).

From there, I can ask myself questions like: why am I looking for a distinct Chinese Canadian food? Is it because I myself am not Canadian and may be looking for the differences between Chinese Canadian and American experiences? Why am I interested in these different varieties of Chinese dishes? These questions have both personal and professional answers. More important than these answers, however, is the critical recognition that our desires and tastes as historians inherently shape the way we analyze texts. By paying attention to our embodied experiences, we can further cultivate critical awareness of how we engage with primary sources. From this awareness vis-à-vis our sources, we can ask questions like: How can what appeals to us today help us not only measure the distance between us and historical diners and chefs but also help us to remain critical of what we as historians or scholars are *ordering* these documents to do? Together, these points speak to a sense of empathy building between the historian and the past, where we as historians are in a better posture or stance to grow and remain curious with the past rather than understanding it as solely a source of solid answers.

How to read a menu: A method

I developed this method of historical menu analysis through the process of developing and teaching menu analysis workshops in Chinese Canadian, Global Asias, and food history classes, as well as on close readings of menus for my research on Chinese Canadian and Chinese American foodways. Due to the multiple teaching and research contexts, I found that it was important for the method to encourage openminded readings that cast a wide net for potential insight into the possible inner workings of restaurants. At the same time, my method of menu analysis encourages engagement with the point of view of the restaurateur, as well as exchanges between diners, in order to not only provide answers to historical queries but more importantly to inspire further questions on culinary histories.

This method is divided into three steps, with a bonus fourth step dependent on the availability of menus (which has been facilitated by the archival work mentioned earlier and will continue to grow): 1) (Un)Identifiable details; 2) Logics/story; 3) Mess or Marginalia; and 4) Cross-Menu comparison. The first three steps build on each other, starting with more straightforward documentation and moving toward more speculative considerations.

(Un)identifiable details:

This first step simply asks you to identify everything possible on the menu. This could include details such as the name of the restaurant, location, hours, prices, type of menu (e.g., take-out menu, in-house menu, online, banquet, special occasion), the materiality of the menu (is it laminated, handwritten, written on paper or cardstock, printed, bound, oral, etc.), dish names, type of meals offered (and when), images/artwork, languages used, font used, and any descriptions available. For this step, stick only to details that are directly discernable from the menu itself, rather than information that is inferable. This step aims to set a foundation for your analysis by providing a long and diverse list of notes and materials to more expansively consider in the more speculative analyses in steps two and three.

These details can also help to deduce more information about the restaurant when read along with other primary sources. For example, the location of the restaurant can help to date the menu when read against city directories or newspaper advertisements, which are much more likely to have a date attached. Additionally, the names of dishes could be cross-referenced with restaurant reviews or oral histories, which may provide more descriptive and sensorial details of the food.

Next, we need to consider what *cannot* be identified from the menu. The often-omitted detail of menus that the historian most likely finds the most frustrating is the date. I ask here for a pause to consider the meaning of this omission. First, the lack of dates, especially on in-house menus, may reflect the restaurateur's expectation of longevity for their menus, or it may, either intentionally or not, play with the expectations of time often placed on restaurant food. The same food served at a restaurant can be expected to be "new" and "modern" by one diner and a "comfort" and "old-standby" by another. This consideration of audience speaks to what Rebecca Spang (2001) described, which I repeat here, as how "[t]he menu collapsed time and space into the restaurant's own never-never land, in a manner that abolished the first and reified the latter" (p. 190). The attention to omissions or a sense of "timelessness" further invites us to consider how we as contemporary readers are relating to these documents.

Apart from the date, other consistently (un)identifiable details on menus may include who wrote the menu as well as the actual physical composition of dishes. For the latter, Gora (2022), citing Lily Cho (2010a), notes that "a menu 'textualizes the food,'" and that "there is a gap between the food itself and its textual representation" (Cho, 2010a, p. 52). Additionally, ambiguous authorship also reminds us to consider the possibilities of multiple authorship, plagiarism, and/or collaboration that could underly the production of the menus. These will also vary from menu to menu depending on the type of menu or restaurant, for example. It may also be interesting to note whether more commonly identifiable details are not present on the menu; this could help us to infer how the restaurateur may have wanted their customers to engage with their restaurant.

Logics or story

This step asks you to use the details identified in the first step to piece together any logic or stories created by the menu. Finding the logic or stories held within menus invites the historian to begin analyzing the text, encouraging them to carefully connect the previously identified details together to form tentative conclusions about how the restaurateur may have wanted their diners to engage with their restaurant and food.

As Gora (2022) argues, "menus tell stories;" however, the transparency and vibrancy of those stories varies widely from menu to menu. For example, some menus quite literally include written stories: stories of the restaurant, stories from the culture their cuisine seeks to represent, or stories about different locations. The menu of Sai Woo restaurant in Toronto, in a blurb authored by "The Management," describes how "Mings, Monguls and Manchurians conquered the Cantonese people, to be conquered in turn by Cantonese culinary art" (Sai Woo, n.d.). Here, the management of Sai Woo do not simply provide a succinct Chinese history lesson for their diners but strategically position their Cantonese cuisine as a "conqueror," which is ready to conquer diners at Sai Woo just as had legendary conquerors of the past. Stories such as these can provide us with information about what restaurateurs expected their diners to know or, which is often the case for ethnic cuisines, what they expected their diners to not know. Here, the management of Sai Woo, it seems, assumes diners to have very little knowledge of Chinese cuisine; however, later in the text they make comparisons to French cuisine, stating that "Cantonese culinary art was as famous in Oriental countries as French cuisine was in Occidental ones" (Sai Woo, n.d.). This invocation of French cuisine assumes a knowledge of French dominance in North American restaurant culture, and, in the case of Sai Woo and Chinese cuisine in Toronto, it also more specifically reflects a shift in Chinese cuisine in the city from being considered a more working-class, cheap option into the realm of *cuisine* and middle- to upper-class consumption.

Sometimes the story of a menu is not as obvious when no long paragraphs or prose are included. In this case, it is more helpful to think about finding the "logic" of the menu. Thinking about the logic of a menu can help us gain insight into the possible ways that restaurateurs hoped to shape the experiences of diners. Steps toward finding underlying logic to the menus can be tricky or, at the very least, not straightforward. It is helpful to begin with considering the following: how the menu organizes dishes and meals, how dishes are priced, if there are any deals or combos, when different or multiple languages are used or explained, and if there are any warnings or symbols included on the menu. Referencing Pearlman's (2018) work as a collection of motifs and strategies used by

restaurateurs through menus can also be a particularly helpful resource in brainstorming the large variety of logics we might be looking for when analyzing menus. For example, the materiality or format of the menu might help to reveal the "logic" or story of the menu. If the menu is laminated, we might be able to speculate on how and for how long the menu was expected to be used within its restaurant.

A "logic"-based analysis is helpful for menus such as a takeout menu from another Toronto Chinese restaurant, Kwongchow Tavern. This specific menu from Kwongchow contains only minimal text beyond lists of dishes and dish categories (Kwongchow Tavern, 1970). However, the number of dishes is dizzying, and with close attention insightful details emerge when considering the above. To begin, the Kwongchow menu organizes their dishes into twenty-nine categories, ranging from specific types of dishes (e.g., Chop Suey, Chow Mein, Cantonese Chow Mein, and Won Ton Noodles in Broth) and dishes based on the type of protein featured (e.g., Beef dishes, Seafoods, and Pork dishes) to more meal-based categories (e.g., Special Chinese Banquet Menu, Canadian dinners, and Desserts) and categories based on preparation technique/sauce (e.g., Curried Dishes, Oriental Style, and Sweet and Sour). Certain categories feature significantly more dishes than others; for example, Cantonese Chow Mein includes fifty-five options, compared to the section on Canadian Dinner which only includes five options. The number of dishes could suggest a myriad of things, including the type of kitchen the restaurant had, the adaptability of certain dish types, a desire to express a sense of abundance, or the popularity of a dish.

The menu does include sub-lists of ingredients underneath some dishes. For example, under Chow Mein it reads "(with Bean Sprouts)," while under Cantonese Chow Mein it reads "(No Bean Sprouts, Fried Soft Noodles);" from this detail, we can capture some of the subtle ways the restaurateurs behind Kwongchow educate their diners about what makes a Cantonese Chow Mein different from a non-Cantonese one. Under other dishes, they occasionally further describe what "Eight Precious Pearl style" means, as well as the ingredient components of the "Bird's Nest Stuffed Special." Another important aspect of this menu is how it organizes select dishes into "Special Full Course Dinners," which allow diners to each order a selection of dishes rather than ordering a dish that is meant to be shared, as well as providing dinner sets so that a group of diners can eat Chinese food in the manner which is more typical: family style. This shows how, even without a dynamic story, menus can still illuminate some of the inner workings or inner "logic" of restaurant life.

Mess or "marginalia"

This step challenges the food historian to make sense of the markings and mess that users of the menus have left behind. As culinary documents, menus expand on the types of marginalia typically expected in historical records. We can begin with the typical marginalia that can adorn menus, such as crossed out and rewritten prices or, if one is really lucky, a collection of signatures and a date (a practice sometimes followed in order to commemorate a special occasion). These details serve as important historical clues that can help to date or trace the menu over time, transforming a timeless document into a time-full one where diners have done part of the work of the historian, reminding us of the relationships held over the table. Or, as we saw from the menu I highlighted at the beginning of this article, sometimes entire pictorial stories are told in doodles in the blank spaces of menus.

Other subtler forms of "marginalia" can be equally thought-provoking; for example, menu collector Harley J. Spiller (2004) has noted that small pencil marks next to certain dishes could suggest that they were often recommended by wait staff. Moving towards the more niche "marginalia" or mess that has been added to menus, as culinary documents, menus can also accrue stains, burn marks, and folds in the pages that reflect their use. While temporally frustrating, taking account of marginalia and mess provides important speculative insight into how we might uncover the history of these documents. For example, returning to the KFC menu from the beginning of this article, how might the Christmas and North American holiday explanations inspire further historical inquiry into this restaurant? How could we learn more about the possible intercultural exchanges that may have happened at KFC in Beijing? Additionally, as my colleague and friend Valeria Mantilla Morales pointed out to me, the elaborateness of marginalia might reflect the comfort customers had in staying in the restaurant long enough to draw all of these images or, at the very least, take the placemat home and draw on it later.

Marginalia and mess then work as crucial reminders of the multi-temporalities of these menus, which may have experienced a history of use in their respective restaurants. Some were meant to be taken or thrown away quickly after printing, while others may have been bound and stayed in their restaurants, with small written-in changes to adapt to changes in price and tastes. These reminders help us to further consider the multiple and diverse interactions that happen over the restaurant table.

Cross-menu comparison

Because of the incredible efforts of archivists and librarians, the accessibility of historical menus has never been higher. With this accessibility comes many opportunities for cross-menu comparison across multiple variables that can help food historians better trace changes across time and connections between culinary geographies. With an abundance of menus, one can begin to trace the geographic scope of a dish like chop suey, which is often assumed to be an American-created dish but can actually be found around the world, from Annecy (France) to Nairobi (Kenya) to Bombay (India). Within this scope, we can also see similarities, differences, and occasionally hints into how dishes arrived or were presented across different regions. For example, chicken, beef, and pork appear as proteins in chop suey consistently across regions (e.g., in New York, Annecy, and Nairobi), however, in a menu from Eastern Chinese Restaurant in Bombay, chop suey dishes are described as "American Chop Suey" and "Chinese Chop Suey," details that may reveal possibly unexpected global migrations. Thorough cross-menu comparison may also reveal dishes that are seemingly unique to specific geographies, for example "Gelato Fritto Cinese" (Chinese Fried Gelato), a dish that journalist Jennifer 8 Lee (2008) has previously identified as an Italian-Chinese specialty. In this way, cross comparing menus offers an invaluable way of tracing and documenting the global movements of Chinese people and foodways.

The abundance of archived menus now also occasionally offers an opportunity to trace how an individual restaurant has changed over time. By examining multiple menus from the same restaurant, historians can witness some of the daily flows and shifts restaurants undergo throughout their lifetimes. From dishes being added or subtracted, shifts in address, and design changes to the addition of policies on lost items and marginalia, the growing pains and pleasures of restaurants are unveiled. In the next section, I show how analysis of a set of menus from a Chinese

restaurant in Toronto can reveal a transformation from an "authentic" and "exotic" fine-dining destination into a Chinese Canadian institution and take-out restaurant.

An example: Eating at Lichee Garden

Lichee Garden opened in 1948 in Toronto's first main Chinatown, located right next to some of the city's main business and political centres. Lichee Garden was a core member of four large Chinese restaurants, known locally as the "Big Four," that dynamically changed how Chinese food was eaten and thought of in the city. Prior to these restaurants, chop suey joints and takeaway dominated the Chinese food scene, but with elegant dining rooms and extensive menus the Big Four convinced non-Chinese Torontonians that Chinese restaurant food could be more than takeout and cheap eating (Lee, 2000, p. 59). While fuller histories need to be written about these restaurants, here I focus on some of their menus to demonstrate how some of the insights of menu analysis can reveal the intercultural dimensions of the history of Lichee Garden. I will focus on a Lichee Garden menu from the Harley J. Spiller Collection (File 3-23, Item 2), and then I will briefly compare it with a few other menus from the Harley J. Spiller and the Robert Bon Lee Collections housed at the University of Toronto Scarborough.

This in-house menu from Lichee Garden begins with the name of the restaurant in the centre of the cover, framed by bamboo, two lichee fruits in the corner, and a header reading "famous Chinese food" directly above the name (Lichee Garden, 1955). In the top right corner is the only Chinese text on the menu: 荔園酒家, the restaurant's Chinese name. The bottom of the cover has the restaurant's business hours, from eleven a.m. to five a.m., and the restaurant's address. It is an in-house menu that folds once, with two pages in the middle and a back cover. The two internal pages include lists of dishes in four columns: 1) Dinners for ranging from two to six diners; 2) four categories: "Selection of Soups," "Boiled Noodles," "Sea Foods in Season," and "Rice;" 3) four categories: "Special Suggestions," "Chop Suey," "Salads" (which come with bread and butter), and "Chow Mein;" 4) five categories: "Poultry Suggestions," "Tender Steaks" served with bread, butter, and French-fried potatoes, "Eggs in Oriental Fashion," and "Miscellaneous." The "Sea Foods in Season" section is the longest with twenty-five dishes, followed by "Poultry Suggestions" (twenty-three dishes) and "Special Suggestions" (twenty-two dishes). The prices range from $0.15 for a bowl of steamed rice to $4.50 for Filet Mignon, which included bread and butter and French-fried potatoes as well as Lichee Lobster served with sweet and pungent sauce.

The top of the middle page outlines that liquor, which is specified to include spirits, beer, and wine, is served with meals only. The bottom of the menu tells us that single orders can be served for two for $0.25 more and that the minimum charge per person is $0.50. The dishes primarily seem to be Chinese and Chinese Canadianized dishes, with some "Western" dishes mixed in (e.g., the dishes under the Tender Steak section). The back cover includes the most prose, with a figure on how to use chopsticks that includes illustrations on the left with a warning at the very bottom that says: "WE regret we cannot assume responsibilities for lost or mislaid articles." On the right side there are four paragraphs under the heading

"CREATED FOR YOUR EATING PLEASURE," and below that is an advertisement for Mon Kuo Trading Company with an illustration and then the text "J. H. Bell & Son, Printers, 17 Scarlett Rd. LY. 7758." In terms of language, the menu is primarily in English apart from the Chinese name of the menu and the Romanized names of certain dishes, like chow mein, Dong Koo Wat Guy, and Yet Ca Mein. From the text and the art on the menu, some unidentifiable details include the date as well as pictures or descriptions (beyond a few ingredients listed) of the dishes. These details can be typed as they are above or organized into a spreadsheet or notes. This step is designed to encourage the researcher to pause, thoroughly look through the entire menu, and note possible avenues for future analysis.

For step two, the most straightforward storytelling in this menu is on the back cover. Beginning with the paragraphs in the righthand column, the menu sets the setting of Lichee Garden's story. It first extends a "very warm welcome to enjoy the finest of Chinese foods," before describing how they created "the atmosphere of the Far East" that is "unexcelled on the American continent." They believe that the connoisseur would "hold in high esteem the flavour and excellence of [their] foods," due to the careful preparation of "century-old recipes" under "the most rigid standards of cleanliness in modern, streamlined kitchens." And, for those who may not know Chinese food, the menu lets you know that they have "experts" on hand to "make suggestions and explain the traditions of eating that are famous throughout the world." The menu also outlines some of the expected functions they hoped to help host, from student, church, and club dinners to wedding parties and business functions. This active scene-setting already begins to explain some of the unidentifiable details from step one, revealing that the restaurateurs sought to meet the needs of both knowledgeable and new diners; the exclusion of dish descriptions/images and the large number of dishes were there not to intimidate less experienced diners but to meet the desires of the pickiest connoisseur, and possibly to encourage conversation between diners and workers at Lichee Garden.

The figure on the left side of the back cover outlines some of the insight the restaurant's experts might bestow in the form of a diagram on how to eat with chopsticks. The actual text instructions on how to use chopsticks are very minimal, but they do suggest that learning to use chopsticks is an easy and empowering process. Premised with "Get Ready," "Set," and "Go," the diagrams outline how diners will quickly be able to lift "flat food," "odd bits," and "round objects." On top of the diagram, under the heading "CHOPSTICKS," the menu states: "The Chinese use chopsticks because they consider the knife and fork barbaric. 'We sit at the table to eat, not to cut up carcasses,' they say." Here, the restaurateurs set up an interesting positioning of Chinese cuisine and food practices vis-à-vis Western cuisines, where Chinese cuisine is equal if not superior to Western cuisines. Their use of the word "they" and the third person here also unclearly position the experts of Lichee Garden against Chineseness, where the folks behind Lichee Garden, who are presumably Chinese, are for some reason not included with the Chinese who deem forks and knives barbaric. This positioning reinforces a sense that the folks at Lichee Garden are there to guide Canadian diners through the world of Chinese cuisine and, in some ways, mediate between an Otherness they invoked and their patrons, who are encouraged to be fascinated with Chinese culture and to understand the folks at Lichee as authorities on the matter. This interpretation of this story in the menu reflects the ways restaurants have been understood as places where power can be negotiated, restructured, and

manipulated (Cho, 2010a, p. 114,129; Finkelstein, 2014, p. vii).

As part of the personal reflective portion of this menu analysis, as a fourth-generation Chinese American, I have found myself always coming back to this part of the menu. Part of this return comes from my own experience of being both Othered but also celebrated for my use of chopsticks growing up, where the ability to use chopsticks was a metric of how "Chinese" I was (Song-Nichols, 2021, pp. 85–86). To see this menu assert a pride in Chinese foodways, albeit cheekily, I found myself relating to this section as a way of talking to internalized and external biases against Chinese food. It also invited reflection on why, when reading this menu, I felt a bit of pride or empowerment through this arguably very problematic framing of "civilization vs. barbarity." This reflection can encourage me to think more critically about how the feelings and memories aspects of these documents stir and shape the ways I use documents within the histories I write. Menus, I believe, uniquely encourage these kinds of reflections, which are invaluable lessons in recognizing the importance of the relationships that historians forge with their primary sources.

The historian can also find subtler stories in how the dishes are presented and organized. The dominance of Chinese dishes on the menu obviously reinforces Lichee Garden's broader storytelling and exaltation of Chinese food; however, the inclusion of non-Chinese categories like Salads and Tender Steaks, along with sides like French-fried potatoes and bread and butter, suggests that those who did not truly want to try Chinese food and were maybe brought there by a colleague or friend were still welcome at Lichee Garden. There is also a story of "freshness" peppered throughout the menu, through the names of dishes like "Fresh Vegetable Chop Suey," "Fresh Shrimp Chop Suey," and "Fresh Shrimp Egg Foo Young." This story of freshness is clearest in the category "Sea Foods in Season," where ten out of twenty-five dishes include the word "fresh" and the notion of seasonality in the category name reinforces a sense of freshness. Here we can consider how and why the restaurateurs behind Lichee Garden mobilized this sense of freshness, for example, perhaps it was to assuage worries about seafood or to fight stereotypes of Chinese cuisine or of Chinatown.

Marginalia features prominently on the menu cover in the form of penciled signatures scattered around the centre design. The words "Christmas Party" are scribbled near the top, letting us know the history of this specific menu and broadly signaling that, at least with this menu, Lichee Garden was successful in hosting at least one banquet. Notably for the historian, a date is included amongst the names, which helps us date the menu to at least one meal held on December 20th, 1955. Closer examination of the names, for example, could yield more historical rabbit holes to jump into, but, from the menu alone, we can begin to get a sense of the festive atmosphere Lichee Garden could hold.

Comparisons to other Lichee Garden menus further our insights into the life and life course of the restaurant. The Robert Bon Lee Collection contains a few menus from Lichee Garden, such as a luncheon menu and a late-night "Tid-Bit" menu (Lichee Garden, n.d.). Although these menus are not dated, their price points are similar to the 1955 menu and the address included on both menus is the same as the one listed in 1955. Other details from these menus may suggest that they are from a different time, perhaps a bit newer, since some dishes not on the 1955 menu are featured (e.g., dishes with Romanized Chinese names like Harr Pin and Choi Fah as well as "Korean Shrimp" and "Mongolian Beef"). The Luncheon menu also announces that it is new and emerged "by special request of our many patrons," and the Tid-Bit Platter

menu states that it emerged "after several months of experimentation by our Master Chefs." By expanding the scope of menu analyses, we can begin to trace how Lichee Garden grew with its patrons, offering them a place for lunch deals as well as a place for "the after-theatre gourmet." Through these different types of menus, the historian can begin to flesh out some of what might have happened during the many hours of work and eating between eleven a.m. and five a.m. Politicians and those in business might have networked over a Lichee Garden lunch special, and Toronto cultural elite may have watched a show in the neighbouring theatres on a Friday before having a "tid-bit" feast until the early hours of Saturday morning. By closely reading the menu, we start to get a sense of the many and changing rhythms of the restaurant during its day-to-day operation, as well as its evolution relative to neighbouring establishments.

I conclude this menu analysis with a menu comparison to a take-out menu dated approximately to the 1990s, towards the end of Lichee Garden's run (Lichee Garden, 1998). The address on this menu reflects the restaurant's move away from downtown, and the hours that now only go to midnight suggest that Lichee Garden was no longer a late-night spot for post-theatre parties. Some of this menu retains notable details from the 1955 menu, such as the bamboo and lichee frame around the restaurant name and the desire to host banquets, as well as some of the dishes and dish categories (e.g., "Eggs in Oriental Fashion" and "Chop Suey" remain, although both have less than half of the dishes from 1955 in the 1990s menu). The 1990s menu also includes new categories, such as "Hot and Spicy Specialties" and "Sweet & Sour Varieties."

Perhaps the most important shift to note is in the different stories these menus tell. While the types of menus are different, the 1990s menu contains significantly less educational information than the menu from 1955, and instead presents Lichee Garden as "A Toronto Tradition" that for "Over 50 years" has been "Specializing in Chinese Cuisine." Lichee Garden here is no longer primarily a pathway or bridge between Toronto diners and an imagined China, but is rather firmly placed within Toronto as a local institution. Rather than highlighting the expertise of its chefs or their knowledge of China, the 1990s menu invokes an authenticity or value through the restaurant's history in Toronto. Furthermore, details like the inclusion of "FREE Home Delivery" and the absence of dishes like Filet Mignon suggest a shift from fine dining towards comfort food. Through this menu comparison, we catch a glimmer of how Lichee Garden aged from a place courting the social elite to a Chinese Canadian cultural institution imbued with comfort and nostalgia.

This menu analysis is not meant to portray a comprehensive history of Lichee Garden; however, analyzing Lichee Garden menus with this method allows us to outline the life course of the restaurant and points to the many and diverse types of relationships forged at Lichee Garden. This analysis reveals how Lichee Garden transformed from a more formal, sit-down Chinese establishment into a "Chinese Canadian" takeout "Toronto Tradition" restaurant, as well as offering glimmers into what this transformation might have meant. It also shows the longevity of certain Chinese dishes and how those dishes moved from being considered authentically "Chinese" to "Chinese Canadian" over time. At the root of this analysis is the illumination of some of the many ways Lichee Garden addressed and grew with its diners. From the signatures to the recurrence of the word "fresh" on the 1955 menu, details on these menus open up "research rabbit holes" that could inspire oral history projects into the party scene at restaurants like Lichee Garden; other details reveal how Lichee Garden reimagined the status of Chinese cuisine vis-à-vis Western cuisines. While

reading a large variety of primary sources will continue to expand and enrich the history of restaurants like Lichee Garden, giving menus the time and unique attention they deserve can begin to answer many more historical questions than one might assume, and this can open up new lines of inquiry that might otherwise be disregarded.

The secrets of menus: A conclusion

Most menus will likely never find their way into an archive, and some of them may challenge the method presented in this article. For example, some restaurants have built-in menus painted on their walls or illuminated in signs above the counter that are too large or cumbersome for most archives or museums to even consider preserving in their limited physical space. Digital menus are becoming more and more commonplace, but, to my knowledge, there are no formal ways of preserving these documents beyond the limits of an individual or restaurant maintaining their websites and therefore their reliance on commercial servers. The menus that food and restaurant historians might have the most interest in and questions about are the *secret* menus that worked beyond the physical pages of menus and emerged through the personal verbal relationships between restaurateur, chef, and diner. These menus would be at the heart of the kind of historical interactions this menu methodology hopes to recover; however, they leave arguably the thinnest trace within our archival records. This is where this primary source methodology could grow along with other historical and interdisciplinary methods, for example oral history or literary analysis, which could help us further understand the lives behind these menus. There are many secret menus that have been lost to the past that may have told more thorough histories, but perhaps we can keep developing our historical tools to recover some of the dynamics these secret menus may have left behind within the less secret ones. Perhaps, then, the next task will be about thinking carefully and expansively when considering where we might find menus and how we might help archivists preserve them.

This methodology presents four steps to navigate the hidden and connective histories held within menus. As shown above, it posits that we have to begin with an open mind in order to identify as much as we can and cannot, rather than instantly diving directly into the multiple rabbit holes and stories these documents tell. From step one to step four, this method attempts to navigate the pointedness and expansiveness of these documents, where menus, with their often-terse language and lists, need a little more time and attention to uncover the multiple connections and stories they reveal. It is in this blending of concise utilitarianism and world-building/storytelling where menus push us to take an equally blended approach in our historical analysis.

As prompted at the beginning of this article, underlying this method is a challenge to the historian to personally connect to these documents, as they encourage us to do. This challenge aims to encourage a posture or stance that is better able to engage the blended-ness of menus. This way we can avoid taking the stories or dishes presented only at face value through considering how our relationships to these documents can evolve and, in turn, reveal different insights into the past. It is my hope that this method is

an invitation for historians to order off these menus, not only once but multiple times, as if they were from our favourite restaurant. It is through creating relationships with these documents that we can better understand and care for the many moments they have witnessed.

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Appendix: Selected list of American and Canadian menu collections

Note: these collections feature menus from around the world.

Bloomsbury Food Library:

- Illustrated Menu Collection: 1830-1951 www.bloomsburyfoodlibrary.com/article?docid=b-9781350934351&tocid=b-9781350934351-001

Colorado College:

- Colorado Menus Collection https://libraryweb.coloradocollege.edu/library/specialcollections/Colorado/Menus.html

Seattle Public Library:

- Seattle Room Menu Collection https://cdm16118.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16118coll5

University of Houston:

- Shamrock Hilton Conroy Collection https://digitalcollections.lib.uh.edu/catalog?f%5Bprovenance_sim%5D%5B%5D=Shamrock+Hilton+Conroy+Collection&locale=en

New York Public Library

- What's on the menu? https://menus.nypl.org/about
- The Buttolph Collection of Menus https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/the-buttolph-collection-of-menus#/?tab=navigation
- W. Dieter Zander Menu Collection https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/w-dieter-zander-menu-collection#/?tab=about
- Soete Menu Collection Https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/soete-menu-collection#/?tab=about
- Baratta Menu Collection Https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/baratta-menu-collection#/?tab=about
- L'art Du Menuisier Https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/lart-du-menuisier#/?tab=about
- Les Arts Arabes: Architecture--menuiserie--bronzes--plafonds--revêtements--marbres--pavements--vitraux--etc. Avec Une Table Descriptive Et Explicative, Et Le Trait Général De L'art Arabe Https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/les-arts-arabes-architecture-menuiserie-bronzes-plafonds-revtements-marbres#/?tab=about
- Schomburg Menu Collection Https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/schomburg-menu-collection#/?tab=navigation
- Banquet Menus from Czarist Russia https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/banquet-menus-from-czarist-russia#/?tab=about

Culinary Institute of American Menu Collections

- Original CIA Menu Collection
- Seth Bradford and Edward S. Dewey Menu Collection
- Roland Chenus Menu Collection
- Craig Claiborne Menu Collection
- Roy Andries de Groot Menu Collection
- Herbert Ernest Menu Collection
- Greenebaum Menu Collection
- Auguste Guyet Menu Collection
- Bruce P. Jeffer Menu Collection
- George Lang Menu Collection
- Vinnie Oakes Menu Collection
- John Edward Oxley Menu Collection
- Chapman S. Root Menu Collection
- Jacob Rosenthal Menu Collection
- Smiley Family Menu Collection
- Lois Westfall Menu Collection

Northwestern University:

- Transportation Library Menu Collection https://www.library.northwestern.edu/libraries-collections/transportation/collection/menu-collection.html
- Ira Silverman Railroad Menu Collection https://dc.library.northwestern.edu/collections/d3a8e587-cc58-4cb0-aea2-65465d42ec3e?Genre=%255B%2522menus%2522%255D&Location=%255B%2522Montreal%2522%255D

University of Toronto Scarborough Menu Collections:

- Harley J. Spiller Collection https://discoverarchives.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/harley-j-spiller-collection
- Robert Bon Lee Collection https://discoverarchives.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/robert-bon-lee-collection
- Brazilian Menu Collection https://discoverarchives.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/brazilian-menu-collection

University of Washington:

- Menu Collection https://content.lib.washington.edu/menusweb/index.html

Los Angeles Public Library:

- Menu Collection https://www.lapl.org/collections-resources/lapl-indexes/menu-collection

Vancouver Island University:

- Imogene Lim Restaurant Menu Collection
  https://viurrspace.ca/handle/10613/2695

Arizona Historical Society:

- Menu Collection
  https://arizonahistoricalsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/library_Arizona-Menu-Collection.pdf

Cornell University:

- Menu Collection

https://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM
06452.html