



[Prev Article](#)



An Appetite For Design: 12 Delicious Vintage Menus

A menu is probably one of the most frequently viewed examples of graphic design, yet also one of the most overlooked. But there was a time when the menu -- gorgeously ornate like fine literature -- were as anxiously anticipated as the meals themselves. A new book by Taschen, *Menu Design in America: 1850-1985* explores the golden age of design and dining through 800 menus, beginning with the bills of fare for the very first restaurants to open during the late 1800's.

The menus also show another transformation in our culture.

From a utilitarian printed menu at one of Abraham Lincoln's private dinners to the flamboyant '80s graphics that were signature for California cuisine, the menus are ephemera from a different era, examining our changing dietary habits through the predominant style of the day. The menus also show another transformation in our culture: At first, dining out was a luxury reserved

exclusively for the upper class. The design shows the gradual progression toward the democratization of dining out.

Like a matchbook or a bar napkin, a menu is another of those accessible pieces of our popular culture -- it had to be a worthy and intriguing visual introduction to the cuisine, yet disposable enough to go missing or absorb the juices of a medium rare chateaubriand. Essentially, in those days, a piece of art was free with the price of the meal.

Design writing treasure Steven Heller pens a historical introduction -- who knew that the menu came about thanks to emerging type foundries rising at the same time as a nascent Parisian restaurant scene? Photographs of the restaurant interiors and detailed captions by culinary historian John Mariani nearly seat the reader at the tables of the dining institutions, many of which are long-faded memories. Hundreds of the menus are owned by Taschen executive editor Jim Heimann as part of his private collection -- and Heimann is, in fact, a designer of menus as well.

It's difficult not to grow just a bit depressed while paging through the vibrant colors and considered typography. Yes, our briskly rotating seasonal cuisine and availability of local ingredients make it difficult for a restaurant to devote serious production value to a menu that will be out-of-date in a week. Still, today's menus are clearly more of an afterthought. There are *exceptions*, of course. But if just one restaurant discovers the iconic branding for the Four Seasons in New York City and reconsiders clamping a sheet of laser-printed paper on a clipboard and calling it a menu, this book is a success.