

Eat, Drink, and Read Menus

Jim Heimann's latest foray into cultural documentation, *Menu Design in America 1850-1985*, almost leaves off where his earlier (1998) *May I Take Your Order: American Menu Design 1920 - 1960* left off. And there is a touch of his (1996) *Car Hops and Curb Service: A History of American Drive-In Restaurants* (1920-1960) too. But being that the recent book is published by Taschen, the title is shorter while the content is more mammoth in every direction.

This hardcover brick contains hundreds of rare and rarer menus, which tell a story of American's eating habits from the high to low and all the spots in between. It is a chronicle of how almost entirely anonymous design branded a named commodity, and how that design both befitted and was independent of the theme at hand - eating. Some of the examples are stunningly rendered, others are stereotypically conventional. Some are modern, others are not just old fashioned, but no fashioned. Taken together, however, they are a vivid portrait of how America branded its eateries.

I was invited to write the introduction. It was a delicious experience. Below is my lead-in. But don't be fooled, Heimann's book is not some dry history. It lives in the way the menus continue to be relevant to today.

If only some obscure yet eccentric figure from the past named, let's call him, "Monsieur Menu" (or rather Georges Laffont Menu, to be exact), was discovered to have conceived the world's first "modern" menu, then a viable origin myth could be written that might go something like this:

The only living son of poor French peasant family from Lot-et-Garonne, at 15 Menu migrated to Paris where he struggled for years laboring as a lowly plongeur (dishwasher) in the kitchens on the Left Bank. Yet all the while he taught himself the art of cooking the finest of eclectic cuisines. At age 32 he miraculously became the chef for the court of Louis XIV and was a favorite of the courtiers, for whom each night he hand scribed the culinary offerings of the evening – voila, la menu!

Alas, no such person ever existed, that we know of, and the creator of the first menu, whoever he or she may be, is forever lost to posterity. The cosmology of menus is decidedly anonymous – and consequently the quality of the narrative suffers from such anonymity. *Quelle dommage!*

