

Book Reviews

Menu Design in America Is A Must See + The Taschen Launch Party

By Jenn Garbee Fri., Sep. 2 2011 at 8:22 AM

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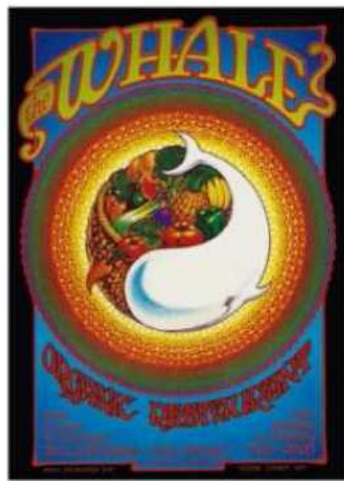
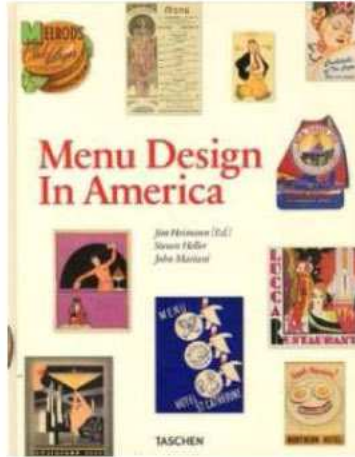
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Large-scale, photo-driven books tend to conjure images of Impressionist landscapes and [Sierra Club](#)-worthy polar bears. Pretty, but also pretty boring after the initial flip-through. But very occasionally, there is a large-scale book that is the rare exception, a book like *Menu Design in America: A Visual and Culinary History of Graphic Styles and Design, 1850-1985* with as much thought-provoking brawn as stunning artistic inspiration.

"America" happens to have a decidedly heavy L.A. restaurant bias in this book, as the primary private collection (anonymous) of menus featured in the book are from an L.A. private donor (the [downtown L.A. Library](#) also has a great menu collection, by the way). Many of the menus are also from the collection of Taschen's executive editor Jim Heimann, who served as editor here. Taschen is no stranger to the high-dollar, glossy design book, but this is its first food-related topic, albeit here falling under their *pop culture* category. We're really hoping it's not the last.



Menu Design Fun In 1971



Taschen

The "culinary history" side of that subtitle is limited to a one-page Introduction by Heimann and photo blurbs (all in English, German and French) for the menus included. Less is definitely more here, as the photos of menus offer up plenty of inspiring chatter on their own.

Many of the local menus included are from restaurants past: The circa 1905 turkey-shaped Thanksgiving menu from L.A.'s [Hotel Leighton](#) (ham aspic, veal grenadines, larded sweetbreads, Waldorf salad), a 1912 menu from [Casa Verdugo](#) in Glendale, here dubbed "an early Mexican restaurant, referred to at the time as Spanish... was a must-see tourist spot" (albondigas soup, enchiladas, chicken with salsa), the [Plantation Club](#) in Culver City (1922: A watermelon-shaped menu to play off the Southern-theme with frog leg, shrimp creole and Virginia ham-topped waffles), the pizza, veal scaloppini and spaghetti-laden menu of Casa d'Amore in Hollywood circa 1946.

You get the idea. The photos here are the real draw -- that 1955 menu cover from The Pan Lad (on Pico near Rancho Park golf course, as the menu notes) with a stick figure sporting a chef's hat, the 1958 Jetsons-worthy space age menu design for Ships Coffee Shop's three L.A. locations.





Taschen

Yes, there are plenty of menus from around the U.S. here as well, mostly from New York City (Murray's art nouveau menu circa 1898, a ballroom menu from the Waldorf-Astoria in 1957). This is a well-edited selection, with elaborately scripted French menus of the times with plenty of good old Fat Eddie's (1956) appeal, too.

The last menu featured in the book? Spago. Chosen by the editors not simply, we presume, for Wolfgang Puck's undeniable influence on modern cuisine (a 1982 menu is listed here in full -- which is not the case for many of the menu cover-driven photo templates throughout the book). But because the menu cover neatly -- subtly -- wraps up the 100+ year heyday of visually stunning menu design (Puck drew the watercolor-like cover featuring several menu items).

A lost era, no doubt, as evident by the minimalist, virtually image-free menus that have been in vogue since. A modern menu age fueled, we can only presume, by restaurateur's assumptions that customers care more about a methodical list of the farms those tomatoes came from than seeing a gorgeous green zebra tomato painted on their menu.

Time, we can only hope, for an eye-inspiring *Menu Design In America* revival.

Menu Design In America Launch party is next Thursday, September 8 at Taschen Beverly Hills. 7 to 9 p.m. Reservations required, 310-274-4300 or store-beverly@taschen.com. One advance book order required for entry to party (\$65, admits two). Refreshments by Spago, Mr. Chow, The Cheese Store of Beverly Hills and other local venues.

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