

Decades of delicious designs **New York City**—What is a menu? Is it only a simple à la carte listing of restorative dishes? Or should it ideally be a reliable guide to a given entrée's agricultural sources? Or might a menu reveal the aesthetic roots and culinary inclinations of its author, the chef, or proprietor?

A menu is all these things and more, and this is amply and colorfully illustrated, in *Menu Design in America—1850–1985* from Taschen. Aply edited and introduced by avid menu collector Jim Heimann, alongside a succinct historical essay about the origin of restaurant menus from food historian Steven Heller, the book's lavish collection of more than 800 menus takes the armchair reader (and the ever-hungry diner in all of us) on a most glorious gastronomic tour of menu design.

From the mid-19th century on, there are dozens of large-format gastronomic behemoths, each boasting Lucullan temptations from the most elegant of Gilded Age watering holes, including an example from New York City's Lotos Club, dated 1900, for a dinner honoring Samuel L. Clemens.

Moving forward, during Prohibition, there's a glimpse of the nightclubs of the Jazz Age. By the late decades of the last century, there's a starburst of culinary creativity, with scores of menus from burger joints to back-road pancake houses.

The artful panorama of these American restaurant listings serves to underline the back-to-where-it-all-began origins of the

menu, in pre-revolutionary France. At that time, for health-conscious Parisians, a *restaurant* meant a restorative broth served in a civilized atmosphere, in a boutique soup shop. With a growing variety of broths offered to discerning clients, à la carte listings became de rigueur; in a flash, the menu was born at the same time a *restaurant* become a restaurant. And by the time the Delmonico brothers arrived in New York City, in the 1820s, establishing a palace of dining pleasure unimaginable to patrons of its smoky chophouses, beer halls, and oyster stands, American cuisine was not only immeasurably enriched, but its very vocabulary expanded in the form of a menu.

—DAVID LINCOLN ROSS

