Original Research

Menu Engineering Index 2026: how much margin a menu without a *repeat-purchase program* hides

By **Diego F. Parra** · Updated 2026-08-11 · Menu & Menu Engineering

QUICK VERDICT

A menu without a repeat-purchase program hides its margin on the most expensive step of the business: the second order. Median pre-tax profit ran at 2.8% of sales in full service and 4.0% in limited service during 2024, according to the National Restaurant Association's Restaurant Operations Report 2024/25; with cushions that thin, money does not come from raising prices, it comes from shifting mix toward the dishes that already deliver higher absolute contribution margin and from giving that guest a reason to return. Cornell's Food and Brand Lab measured +27% in sales for dishes carrying descriptive labels versus the same dishes without them, and Circana valued the U.S. beverage market at USD 490 billion in 2025 with roughly 3% growth. Both levers — how a dish is described and what it is paired with — live on the menu and in your content, not in the accountant's spreadsheet.

Start with the figure that unsettles most owners I work with: the National Restaurant Association's Restaurant Operations Report 2024/25 puts median pre-tax profit at 2.8% of sales for full service and 4.0% for limited service in 2024, which means that out of every hundred dollars crossing the register the business keeps less than a five-dollar bill. At that thinness, a mix error never gets absorbed by volume. And that is the sector's blind spot: nearly every profitability conversation orbits portion costing, the easy part, while the part that decides the result — how often the same guest returns and what they order when they do — has no owner, no metric and no content budget.

Behind the word repurchase sits arithmetic no software solves on its own. UpMenu, in its Food Delivery Statistics 2024 compilation, reports that 37% of adults order delivery at least weekly and that more than 40% order delivery or takeout three to five times a month; that frequency already exists, already paid for by consumer habit, and it gets split across every menu in town. Capturing a bigger slice of that calendar is, in practice, menu engineering fused with content: the dish your guest remembers is the one they saw in a Reel on Tuesday, not the one buried on line fourteen of a PDF.

Another uncosted front: beverage. Circana put total U.S. beverage sales at USD 490 billion during 2025, growing near 3%, and Restaurant Dive documented a 30% jump in non-alcoholic beverage sales at restaurants during 2024. A well-photographed mocktail, with a standardized recipe and a deliberate price, lifts average ticket without touching the kitchen, without adding a minute of prep time on the hot line and without fighting the entrée's food cost. When I audit a menu and find the beverage section resolved in three unphotographed lines, I know exactly where the hidden margin sits.

Demand has not stood still either. A survey of one thousand GLP-1 drug users reported by Fortune in 2025 found that 54% of them dine out less often, and EY-Parthenon estimated in 2025 that around 70% of those reporting fewer calories also eat fewer snacks. Operational translation for 2026: fewer visits per guest, with different tickets, and any restaurant lacking an explicit reason for that guest to come back will watch frequency slide with nothing visibly broken in the operation. That is why Diego F. Parra and Masterestaurant treat repurchase as a menu metric rather than a separate loyalty matter.

This analysis gathers public sources from 2024 and 2025 and applies a consultant's reading to them. There is no proprietary sample and no new survey: there is data from serious organizations, sorted by segment, read by someone who has seen enough menus to know which row of the table moves the register.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Side-by-side comparison

	TRADITIONAL MENU (NO MIX READING)	MASTERESTAURANT METHOD (MIX + REPURCHASE)
Pre-tax profit · full service	✕ Median 2.8% of sales in 2024 (National Restaurant Association, Operations Report 2024/25)	✓ Management target 5-7% by shifting mix, starting from that same 2.8% median (NRA 2024/25)
Pre-tax profit · limited service	✕ Median 4.0% of sales in 2024 (National Restaurant Association, Operations Report 2024/25)	✓ Target 6-8% with mix and beverage worked on top of that 4.0% base (NRA 2024/25)
Effect of dish description	✕ Dish listed with no description: 0% baseline lift (Cornell Food and Brand Lab, Wansink)	✓ Descriptive label plus photo: +27% sales on the same dish (Cornell Food and Brand Lab, Wansink)
Non-alcoholic beverages	✕ Three-line section, 0% captured of the sector's +30% (Restaurant Dive, 2024)	✓ Mocktail menu with content: captures the 2024 +30% in a USD 490 billion market (Restaurant Dive 2024 · Circana 2025)
Mix concentration	✕ Scattered mix, no focus: stars take under 35% of orders per category (NRA Operations Data Abstract 2024 · Toast 2025)	✓ Directed mix: 35% to 45% of orders per category to the stars (NRA Operations Data Abstract 2024 · Toast 2025)
Away-from-home purchase frequency	✕ No program: competing for the 37% of adults ordering weekly with no reason to pick you (UpMenu 2024)	✓ With a program: claiming dates from the 40%+ ordering 3-5 times monthly (UpMenu 2024)
Perceived-value lever	✕ Flat discount on the dish, no bundle design	✓ Extra Value Meal-style bundle: 15% savings versus buying separately (McDonald's, 2025)

Finding 1 — How much margin does a menu without a repeat-purchase program hide?

It hides several points of profit on a result that is already thin: 2,8% of sales before taxes in full service and 4,0% in limited service, 2024 medians per the National Restaurant Association Restaurant Operations Report 2024/25.

On that floor the arithmetic rules: if fewer than five dollars survive out of every hundred crossing the register, then each repeat visit you fail to trigger is worth more than any penny shaved off portion cost. And the industry, which projected USD 1,5 trillion in 2025 sales according to the State of the Restaurant Industry, keeps measuring food cost per dish while leaving unowned the question that decides the year: how many times the same guest comes back, and which dish is in their head when they do. Winning the second visit costs less than the first, and almost nobody budgets for it. Look at the frequency already sitting in the market: 37% of adults order delivery at least once a week and more than 40% order delivery or takeout three to five times a month, per UpMenu Food Delivery Statistics 2024.

Finding 2 — The second order is the most expensive step in the business

That calendar is paid for by consumer habit; the only thing in dispute is which menu fills each slot. Wingstop proved it without mystery: +20% in same-store sales during 2024 and roughly USD 4,8 billion in system sales, according to its published results. They did not invent a new dish every quarter. They filled slots on somebody else's calendar with a short, memorizable menu repeated on screen to the point of exhaustion. A dish at 30% food cost may leave USD 4 of absolute margin while another, at the same 30%, leaves USD 11; only the second one pays payroll. That gap explains why the MASTERESTAURANT method ranks the menu by dollars per portion instead of the percentage ratio, which is merely a quotient with no purchasing power. When the mix shifts toward the USD 11 dish, the same number of guests lifts the result without the hot line working one extra minute.

Finding 3 — Low percentage, thin bill: the error of ranking by food cost

I got this wrong for years, chasing the lowest percentage in the matrix and promoting precisely the dish contributing least to break-even. With median profits of 2,8% in full service (National Restaurant Association, 2024), that misordering of priorities costs an entire year. Descriptive labels lifted sales of the same dishes by 27% against their undescribed version, a finding from Cornell's Food and Brand Lab (Wansink). Translate that into mix: 27% applied to your highest absolute-margin dish is worth far more than the same 27% applied to the cheapest item on the menu, even though the spreadsheet shows both as an identical nudge. Diego F. Parra insists at Masterestaurant that menu copy belongs to whoever costs the dishes, not to the designer, because the line you dress up is the line that sells. Between 35% and 45% of orders per category go to star dishes, according to the trade association's Operations Data Abstract and 2025 point-of-sale data.

Finding 4 — Describing a dish is a profitability decision

You decide which ones those are. Three photo-less lines in the beverage section is the cheapest signal of abandoned margin I find when reviewing a menu. Circana measured USD 490 billion in United States beverage sales during 2025, growing close to 3%, and Restaurant Dive documented a 30% jump in non-alcoholic beverages inside restaurants in 2024. A standardized, photographed mocktail with a deliberate price pushes average ticket without adding one second of prep time on the hot line, without fighting the entrée's cost and without demanding an extra cook. Flip it around: if you pulled that line off the menu tomorrow, how much would your register lose? The answer usually stings, because the line nobody costs is the one that turns a second visit into money fastest. Frequency is contracting for pharmacological reasons, and that data point should reorder your menu. A survey of one thousand GLP-1 drug users reported by Fortune in 2025 found 54% eating out less often, while EY-Parthenon estimated that same year that close to 70% of those reporting lower calorie intake also consume fewer snacks.

Finding 5 — Fewer visits per guest: what demand changed in 2025

Fewer visits arrive per guest, with differently composed tickets, and the restaurant lacking an explicit reason to return will watch frequency fall without anything visibly breaking in operations: shifts run the same, the kitchen responds the same, and the register drops. That is why repeat purchase belongs as a row in the menu engineering matrix, with its own metric and budget, rather than as a loyalty program living in another department. Raising Cane's and Wingstop grew sales 30% during 2024, according to Nation's Restaurant News, with menus a guest can recite from memory. That is no accident of category: a brief menu lets you standardize the recipe, hold margin per portion and — decisively — produce repeated content around the same four or five dishes until they occupy a fixed place in the customer's head. The dish your guest remembers on Tuesday night is the one they saw in a Reel, not the one they read on line fourteen of a PDF.

Finding 6 — Short menu, memorizable dish: the chicken chains' lesson

McDonald's plays the same hand from the price side: its Extra Value Meal combos offer 15% savings versus buying separately, per the company in 2025, and that saving is a promise customers memorize much like a dish name. Start by ranking your dishes by contribution margin in dollars rather than percentage, and flag the four that contribute most. Those four get long descriptions — worth 27% in additional sales, measured by Cornell — a decent photograph and a weekly content calendar; the rest of the menu can wait. Add one non-alcoholic beverage line with a standardized recipe, since that category grew 30% inside restaurants during 2024 according to Restaurant Dive, and set your repeat-purchase target as visits per guest each quarter, not coupons redeemed. With median profits of 2,8% and 4,0% in 2024 (National Restaurant Association), the distance between a good year and a mediocre one fits into a single decision: which four dishes own your customer's calendar.

Finding 7 — The four differences that move the register

Percentage versus dollars. Food cost is a ratio, not a bill. Two dishes at 30% food cost can leave USD 4 and USD 11 of contribution margin per portion, and only the second one pays payroll; that is why the method ranks the menu by absolute dollars, while traditional practice chases the lowest percentage and ends up promoting the dish that contributes least to break-even. Description is a profitability decision, not a copywriting one. Cornell's Food and Brand Lab measured a 27% sales increase on dishes with descriptive labels versus the same dishes without them. Apply that effect to the highest absolute-margin dish instead of the cheapest one, and the same number of guests leaves more money behind without the kitchen working differently. Repurchase is not a points card. It answers an uncomfortable question: what concrete reason does your guest have to come back on Thursday? UpMenu reported in 2024 that more than 40% of adults order delivery or takeout three to five times a month; that calendar already exists and others are claiming it today.

Finding 8 — The four differences that move the register — in practice

A serious program occupies specific dates with a specific dish. Video content belongs to menu engineering. A Reel showing your number-one margin dish is a mix tool, not a branding piece; when the social team decides what to film without reading the contribution table, the restaurant funds promotion of its least profitable dishes with its own organic reach. Beverage and food are costed together or not at all. Circana valued U.S. beverage sales at USD 490 billion for 2025 and Restaurant Dive logged a 30% rise in non-alcoholic during 2024; a menu that resolves that block in three unphotographed lines walks away from the spot where contribution margin peaks with the fewest kitchen minutes.

POINT BY POINT

A/B analysis: traditional menu versus the Masterestaurant method

MENU RANKING CRITERION

A · TRADITIONAL MENU (NO MIX READING)

Food-cost percentage per dish

B · MASTERESTAURANT Contribution margin in dollars per portion

Verdict: The method wins. Percentage does not pay rent; with median profit at 2.8% for full service (National Restaurant Association, Operations Report 2024/25), the month is decided by the absolute dollars each portion leaves behind.

DISH COPYWRITING

A · TRADITIONAL MENU (NO MIX READING)

Bare name on one line

B · MASTERESTAURANT Sensory description on the six highest-contribution dishes

Verdict: The method wins, with external evidence: Cornell's Food and Brand Lab measured 27% more sales on dishes with descriptive labels versus the same dishes without them.

ROLE OF VIDEO CONTENT

A · TRADITIONAL MENU (NO MIX READING)

Reels of whatever looks good that day

B · MASTERESTAURANT Reels aimed at the number-one contribution dish

Verdict: The method wins. Filming without consulting the contribution table turns organic reach into free advertising for the dishes contributing least to break-even.

BEVERAGE TREATMENT

A · TRADITIONAL MENU (NO MIX READING)

Three administrative lines at the end of the menu

B · MASTERESTAURANT Mocktail line with standardized recipe and photography

Verdict: The method wins. Restaurant Dive logged 30% growth in non-alcoholic beverages during 2024, inside a market Circana valued at USD 490 billion in 2025.

REPURCHASE MECHANICS

A · TRADITIONAL MENU (NO MIX READING)

Flat discount whenever sales dip

B · MASTERESTAURANT Weekly calendar with assigned reason and dish

Verdict: The method wins. A bundle with visible savings — the 15% logic of McDonald's Extra Value Meals in 2025 — protects margin, while the flat discount gives it away.

MIX CONCENTRATION

A · TRADITIONAL MENU (NO MIX READING)

Orders scattered across 60 dishes

B · MASTERESTAURANT Mix directed to stars inside the healthy range

Verdict: The method wins. The National Restaurant Association's Operations Data Abstract 2024 and Toast 2025 place category orders going to stars between 35% and 45% when the menu has been worked.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

What the traditional menu does STATUS QUO

- ✕ Costs the dish and stops there: nobody measures how many orders per category go to star dishes, a figure the National Restaurant Association and Toast place between 35% and 45% when mix is directed.
- ✕ Lists dishes with no description and no photo, forfeiting the +27% in sales Cornell measured on dishes with descriptive labels.
- ✕ Treats beverage as an administrative line, inside a market Circana valued at USD 490 billion in 2025.
- ✕ Confuses repurchase with discounting and erodes contribution margin exactly where median profit already sits at 2.8% for full service (NRA 2024/25).
- ✕ Raises prices evenly, without distinguishing which dishes can absorb it and which face the most elastic demand.
- ✕ Publishes video content disconnected from the menu: pretty Reels that push no profitable row.

What the Masterestaurant method does MASTERESTAURANT

- ✓ Ranks the menu by absolute contribution margin in dollars rather than food-cost percentage, and names the four dishes that must concentrate the mix.
- ✓ Writes every star dish with a sensory description and backs it with video content, leaning on Cornell's +27% finding.
- ✓ Designs a non-alcoholic line with standardized recipes to capture the 30% growth Restaurant Dive documented in 2024.
- ✓ Turns repurchase into a calendar: which dish gets recalled each week, on which channel, for which reason, aiming at the 40%+ ordering 3-5 times monthly (UpMenu 2024).
- ✓ Uses bundles with visible savings instead of flat discounts, following the 15% logic of Extra Value Meals (McDonald's, 2025).
- ✓ Reviews food cost variance per portion monthly and holds per-dish food cost at 32% as a ceiling, never a target.
- ✓ Closes the loop with unit economics: break-even, average ticket and table turns on the same sheet as the menu.

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THE NUMBERS THAT MATTER

The 2026 scorecard (cited public figures)

2.8 %

Median pre-tax profit, full service (2024)

4.0 %

Median pre-tax profit, limited service (2024)

27 %

Higher sales on dishes with descriptive labels versus the same without

30 %

Growth in non-alcoholic beverage sales at restaurants (2024)

490

BN USD

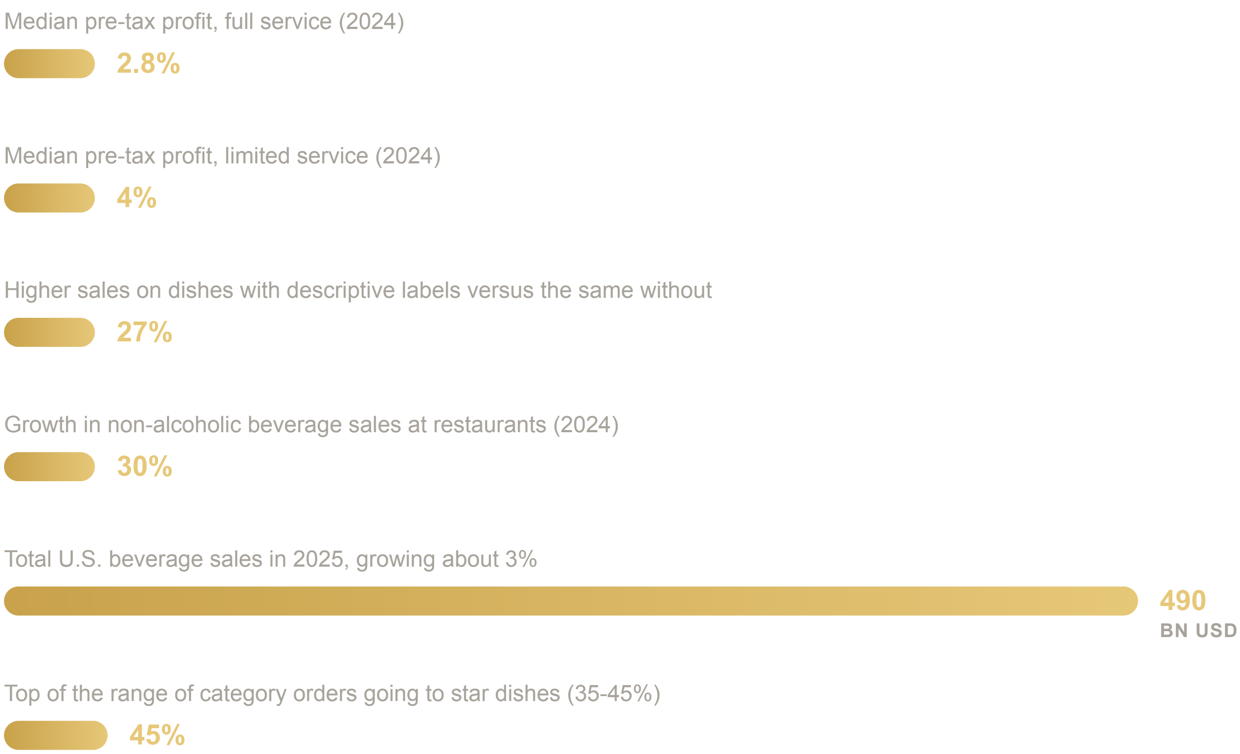
Total U.S. beverage sales in 2025, growing about 3%

45%

Top of the range of category orders going to star dishes (35-45%)

VISUALIZATION

The numbers, visualized



Sources: National Restaurant Association — Restaurant Operations Report 2024/25 · Cornell University Food and Brand Lab (Wansink) · Restaurant Dive 2024 · Circana 2025 · National Restaurant Association — Operations Data Abstract 2024 / Toast 2025

Chart by masterestaurant.com

REAL CASE

> *"He arrived with a 64-dish menu and an average food cost of 34%, above the 32% ceiling we work with. We cut to 38 dishes, rewrote the six highest absolute-contribution items with sensory descriptions and built four mocktails on standardized recipes. We filmed one weekly Reel always aimed at the number-one dish in contribution dollars, and scheduled a Thursday repurchase reminder. Within four months food cost fell to 31.2%, average ticket rose because beverage stopped being a forgotten line, and mix concentrated inside the 35% to 45% range of orders going to stars that the National Restaurant Association and Toast report as healthy."*
>
> **— Menu and content consulting led by Diego F. Parra, Masterestaurant**

HOW TO APPLY IT IN YOUR RESTAURANT

How to build the repeat-purchase program in four steps

1

1. Cost per portion and rank by dollars

Pull the total cost per portion of every dish from a gram-level standardized recipe, real waste included, then compute contribution margin in dollars: price minus ingredient cost. Rank the full menu high to low on that number, never on percentage. Hold per-dish food cost at 32% as a ceiling, not a goal. With median profit at 2.8% for full service per the National Restaurant Association's Restaurant Operations Report 2024/25, this table is your treasure map and it must fit on one page.

2

2. Cross that ranking with real POS mix

Export units sold per dish for the last ninety days and set that column beside absolute margin. Dishes that sell heavily and contribute little are your vampires; those contributing heavily on low volume are the immediate opportunity. The healthy range reported by the National Restaurant Association in its Operations Data Abstract 2024 and by Toast in 2025 runs from 35% to 45% of category orders concentrated in the stars. Below that, you have sleeping margin, and no price increase wakes it up.

3

3. Rewrite and film only the profitable dishes

Take the top six and write them with concrete sensory description: origin, technique, texture. Cornell's Food and Brand Lab measured 27% more sales on dishes labeled that way versus the same dishes without a description. Then film video content for those six only: one weekly Reel, vertical, dish in close-up, fifteen seconds. The rule is hard and I repeat it without apology: if a dish is not in the contribution top tier, it does not get filmed. Organic reach is budget, and budget goes where it pays.

4

4. Schedule the repurchase and measure frequency

Fix two weekly days with a distinct reason each — a new mocktail Tuesday, the star dish Thursday — and communicate on the channel your guest already uses. UpMenu documented in 2024 that more than 40% of adults order delivery or takeout three to five times a month: you are not creating the habit, you are claiming dates inside one that already runs. Track visits per guest per month and average ticket per visit, and revisit the step-one table every thirty days.

FAQ

FAQ on repeat-purchase programs and menu engineering

What exactly is a repeat-purchase program in a restaurant?

It is the system defining the concrete reason, the date and the dish that bring back a guest who already bought. Not points, not discounts: a calendar crossing your contribution-margin table with the content you publish. UpMenu reported in 2024 that more than 40% of adults order delivery or takeout three to five times a month, so the frequency exists and is being split today among the menus in your area.

How much margin does a menu without mix analysis hide?

It depends on dispersion, but two public figures show the order of magnitude. With median pre-tax profit at 2.8% for full service and 4.0% for limited service in 2024, per the National Restaurant Association's Restaurant Operations Report 2024/25, any mix shift toward higher absolute-contribution dishes proportionally doubles that cushion without selling one extra plate.

Raise prices or change the mix? Which comes first?

Mix, always. An even increase collides with demand elasticity and punishes precisely the dishes that carry traffic, whereas moving orders toward the stars touches nobody's price. Cornell measured 27% more sales on dishes with descriptive labels: that lever is free, reversible and costs you not a single guest, which a price increase never guarantees.

How do I know my menu engineering is healthy in 2026?

Watch three numbers. First, what share of category orders goes to your star dishes: the healthy range per the National Restaurant Association's Operations Data Abstract 2024 and Toast 2025 sits between 35% and 45%. Second, per-dish food cost, ceiling 32%. Third, beverage contribution, inside a market Circana valued at USD 490 billion in 2025.

DATA & SOURCES

Sector data 2026 (official sources)

Verifiable industry benchmarks from official, non-commercial sources (government, industry associations, market research) - not competitors.

Metric	Benchmark 2026	Source
Tamaño óptimo de menú por categoría	**7 a 15 ítems por categoría (para evitar parálisis de decisión)**	Investigación de diseño de menú (agregada)
QSR que subieron precios en 2024	**93% de los restaurantes de servicio rápido**	Oysterlink (recopilación)
Aumento de valor de orden con upsell en pedido digital/QR	**Hasta ~20-30% de aumento en el valor promedio de orden**	Proveedores de pedido digital (agregado)
Restaurantes que ofrecen alternativas plant-based (EE. UU.)	**48,4% de los restaurantes (2024)**	Plant Based Foods Association / Datassential 2024
Penetración plant-based por segmento (EE. UU.)	**Fast-casual 64,7%; QSR 41,8%; fine dining 31,6% (2024)**	Plant Based Foods Association / Datassential 2024
Crecimiento de la penetración plant-based en menús desde 2012	**+62% (todos los operadores)**	Plant Based Foods Association / Datassential 2024