

Menu Magic:

How You Can Increase Restaurant Sales





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What's on your menu?

More than your website or your dining room, your menu is likely the very first (and longest lasting) impression a diner will have of your restaurant. It projects your brand out to the market you want to attract and solidifies it in consumers' minds. And while food is not the number one driver of return visits — overall experience and rewards of choice are — what you choose to feature on your menu has an enormous effect on your bottom line.¹

Simply put — your menu can make the difference between success out of the gate or falling behind the crowd.

While we are going to dig deep on the nature of menu design, pricing, size, and seasonality, there are a few things to first consider about the effect your menu has on your operations (and bottom line).

Conventional wisdom is that 80 percent of your profits as a restaurant come from about 20 percent of your menu items.² Every menu has its popular items and its dust-gatherers, but do you actually know which is which?

Conducting an audit of your menu against sales of each item every six months can show you exactly where cuts can be made to a bloated menu. Even dishes that sell moderately well should be reviewed to see if they pan out financially.

Ask yourself: Does any dish on your menu contain an ingredient not necessary for any other dish? Are any of your dishes more time- or space-consuming than others, and how often are they ordered? Are all of your dishes even profitable?

If the goal is to spend no more than 35 cents for every dollar you charge for a menu item, it's important to periodically cost out your entire menu to make sure everything you offer your customers falls into a comfortable profit margin.

And understanding that your menu can often define the physical space of your restaurant is a tough hurdle for a lot of restaurateurs. An overly ambitious menu (both in size and level of difficulty in execution) can be an unnecessary strain on your staff and facilities, often leading to unnecessarily increased costs.

Conducting a second type of audit — one of your facility, where you determine storage, refrigeration, and preparation area needs, can help you eliminate bottlenecks, and balance your menu items across a physical space.

If you determine that your equipment needs have changed, balance that cost against the wasted time and labor involved in working around the problem. The result of this type of analysis can immediately impact the quality (and profitability) of your menu.

A third test you can conduct is a little simpler: Have someone in your front of house staff track the time random guests spend reading your menu from when they first pick it up, until they close it and fold their hands. Gallup reports that the average customer only spends about 109 seconds reading a menu.³ If your guest spends less time than that, you can afford to expand your menu. If they spend longer, ask yourself: are they having trouble making a decision — and more importantly, are they making the decision you'd prefer as an owner?

Most importantly, these audits keep you focused on what diners actually buy — what literally tickles their taste buds — rather than your personal style. It's an important perspective to keep in mind as we begin by looking at the magic behind your **menu design**.



The average customer only spends about 109 seconds reading a menu.



Chapter

Design

If there's one thing we've learned over the years in the food industry, it's that every menu is some restaurateur's baby. That can be a problem. Yes, your menu is the heart and soul of what a chef and owner want to put out into the world, but your menu is also key to ensuring you make money when you do. This dual reality can sometimes be difficult to reconcile.

Many restaurateurs express an emotional connection to every item listed on their menu, but at the end of the day, when everything is special, nothing is. It's important to recognize opportunities for bigger profit, and identify ways to structure your menu not just to attract new customers, but to keep those customers coming back for more — again and again.

Know What You Have

Before you work on revising your menu layout, it's important to conduct the cost audit we referenced briefly in the introduction. It is the only way to truly understand how every single item on your menu actually works for you in terms of **profit and popularity**. Once your analysis is complete, you'll likely find some dishes from all four categories of items: Plow horse, star, dog, and puzzle.

Plow horse: Low profit, high popularity

This could be your soup and salad lunch special, a one topping pizza, or that draft beer that seems to pull people in after work day after day. The plow horses are items that you probably sell a whole lot of, because they are priced with sensitivity to consumers

who aren't looking to spend a lot in one sitting but then inevitably become frequent, repeat customers as a result. Try to keep plow horses available and stable in price for as long as possible to keep pulling those repeat customers in.

Star: High profit, high popularity

These are the items that may be unique to your establishment, maybe even a dish your restaurant is known for. You can increase the price (within reason), and people will still buy them. Why? Because they can't get them anywhere else. This could be a version of a popular dish made with higher quality or more unique ingredients — like pork belly dim sum — or a dish that very few restaurants have on their menus — like poutine or roasted chicken.

Dog: Low profit, low popularity

These menu items take up space that could be allocated to more profitable items, and when they are ordered, they can reduce sales of your stars and puzzles – your more profitable offerings. Try to get dogs off your menu, as fast as possible. If for some reason, you absolutely must keep them on, add \$1 or \$2 to the price. Make them worth your while.

Puzzle: High profit, low popularity

These are those dishes that should sell better, but aren't. The reasons for that can be a real mystery to you. Don't take them off the menu. Just try to figure out how to sell more of them. Maybe take the price down a little, or give them better placement on your menu. If you play around with the recipes, remember not to damage their profitability, but only do things that will make the dishes sell better.

Menu Engineering Worksheet

How do some of your menu dishes rank?

Fill in the blank with items from your own restaurant menu.

Plow Horse

(low profit, high popularity)

Star

(high profit, high popularity)

Dog

(low profit, low popularity)

Puzzle

(high profit, low popularity)

Puzzles are likely to benefit most from the following ideas for making your menu more profitable *and* attractive to repeat customers:

List Items Out

How you list menu items is critical to influencing the choices your customers make.

- Always arrange your dishes in a given section by most profitable to least profitable — NOT by most expensive to least. Your most expensive dish could also have your highest food cost.
- Exception to this rule: group similar menu items together, for instance: *Cheese Quesadilla* and *Chipotle Chicken Quesadilla*.
- Putting five items per section (appetizer, salad, entree, sandwich, etc.) is optimal. Seven is the maximum. Offer more choices than that and diners will frequently default to what they know or had last time, which is not necessarily your most profitable item.
- Use a single column per menu page. The simpler the layout, the less distracted your customers get. The more columns, the less control you have over where your customers' eyes will roam.
- If your menu is a single panel (no folds), only print on one side. Half of your customers will never even turn the menu over if you print on both sides.
- If your menu is two-panel (single fold), put your star items at the **top center of**

the right panel. Your customers' gaze will spiral out counter-clockwise from there. *Note: Studies have shown customers spend more on two-panel menus than one.*

- Also, if you have a daily special insert separate from your printed menu, expect that 60 percent of your entree sales will come from there. Use this as an opportunity to upsell.



Think About Names

The easier a menu is to read, the more your customers are going to order — and the happier they'll be with their choices.

- Create a new name for your items that brands them apart from the rest, but still defines what they are. "Joe's Special" doesn't really draw a customer in at first glance. But "Aunt Josephine's Old World Sicilian Lasagna" gives a dish personality and a provenance.



Displaying a signature spotlight on your menu is a great way to drive interest to a particular item.

- Always use a dish's full name, even if part of that name is the same as the category. For example, "Buffalo Chicken Salad" and "Cobb Salad" rather than "Buffalo Chicken" and "Cobb."
- Pedigree your items with mention of high-quality ingredients in their descriptions. Including the name of well-known brands ("...with Ghirardelli Chocolate,") or farms can give a dish instant cache. But double check individual brands' copyright guidelines.
- Generally, the more ingredients you can easily list on your menu per dish, the better. Not only will it ensure those with allergies have a heads up, but it adds to the allure of the dish. Every ingredient could be someone's favorite.
- Attach more descriptive copy to your more profitable items. As the allure and value of the dish goes up in a consumer's head, the price of the dish seems more reasonable.
- Don't boast about secret ingredients in the descriptions — studies show people taste what you tell them they're tasting. Your customers will never credit you for ingenuity without clues to do so.
- Include meaningful testimonials. If a particular dish received a write-up in a prominent magazine, won a State Fair blue ribbon, or was featured on a television show, by all means call it out!

Spotlight Your Stars

Displaying a **signature spotlight** on your menu is a great way to drive interest to a particular item that's "highly recommended by our chef" (or accountants). Box that dish in to make it stand out among the others. This technique draws the eye in and can make the work of scanning a menu less arduous for the diners' weary eyes. But like anything else, the more you use this trick, the less it means. Limit your spotlight items to one per menu category.

Occasionally, restaurants will also feature **decoys** — items that would so rarely get ordered that it seems silly to leave them on the menu, like a 72oz steak or a banana split with 12 kinds of ice cream served in a kitchen sink. So why feature them? Because these types of extreme menu offerings can get your customers' brain moving. You might not order a steak as big as your head, but just reading about it might put you in the mood for a much more reasonably priced (and profitable) 20oz Prime Rib.



Draw Customers In

Yes, keeping your menu clean and easy to read means eliminating distractions. But like spotlight items, drawn graphics can help pull the customers' eyes across your menu page when used sparingly.

- Consider designing a special logo or sophisticated graphic for your premium signature item. It tells the client that a certain item is so great, it was worth the effort of making a logo.

- Use custom illustrations (not clip art) to give your customers that “OH WOW!” experience before they even take their first bite. Drawings will always have the advantage over photographs, because they let the viewer insert their own expectations into the experience.
- In fact, poorly executed photos can do serious damage to your brand. A bad photograph can make your amazing food look the same as everyone else's, if not worse.
- However, seeing an appetizing photo of your food can let the diner psychologically “taste” the item before ordering. However, the dish will never taste as good in reality as it did in their head after seeing it in a photograph. This is why photos might work best on a website that customers peruse hours or days before a visit — not so much minutes before a dish is set in front of them.
- If you are adamant about using photographs on your menu — or feel an item is so unique it requires one, just don't overdo them. When there's a photo of every item, you're leveling the visual playing field, not getting the benefit of increased interest on any particular items.

Of course, layout and design may impact how your menu performs with customers, but after all checks are settled, what's it doing for your bottom line? That's where **pricing** comes in...



Chapter

Pricing

The price. It's often the first thing your guest will notice, and probably one of the (many) things keeping you up at night. How do you know it's right? Does demand matter? Is just covering your costs enough? Does the price reflect the real value the customer is receiving from their meal?

All of these factors (demand, cost, and value) are important to consider when pricing out each item on your menu, whether you're opening a restaurant for the first time or are a veteran restaurateur.

Pricing by Demand

Frequently auditing your pricing or considering a dynamic model is one way to ensure that none of your menu items

become a loss leader. Many restaurants only change their pricing once or twice a year, if that often. But compared with the pricing models of many other on-demand industries today, this infrequency is unusual.

Amazon.com, for example, changes pricing on millions of items every day, sometimes up to eight times on a single item in a single day.⁴ Certainly, this kind of flexibility in pricing is not practical for most restaurants, but taking a scalable lesson from their methods is still possible.

Knowing when demand for certain items peaks can help you make decisions about variable pricing. For example, do you price similar menu items differently at lunch versus dinner? Many restaurant operators do, and some have even gone so far as to set

higher prices for times when reservations and seating hit maximum capacity.

If your tables all fill between 6 and 9 p.m., but you're finding it difficult to drive revenue during the 4 to 6 p.m. stretch, a pricing adjustment between the two may encourage diners to fill your dining room at a more even pace. And it's not unreasonable to charge more during higher volume periods. When traffic goes up, efficiency among your staff goes down. And when efficiency drops, costs — sometimes hidden — always rise.

When traffic goes up, efficiency among your staff goes down. And when efficiency drops, costs always rise.

Likewise, considering a different pricing model for online orders is another way to adjust your menu based on demand. And there's no question it can be profitable. When Taco Bell introduced its app-based ordering system this spring, they saw a 20 percent increase in average total bill.⁵

Much of this increase can be attributed to the relatively low-pressure environment of online ordering. With all the options for customization laid out to a diner and no server to add pressure to the sale, consumers

will make more impulsive and taste-driven choices — and 50 cents here and there for extra onions or a side of sour cream quickly adds up to a significant increase in revenue.



But there's also some value in reconsidering base pricing for a mobile or remote setting. High delivery fees can be off-putting to a consumer, but slightly higher prices across the board often go unnoticed. Just be careful about finding that right balance to meet demand — no one wants to alienate the customer.

Pricing by Cost Versus Value

More commonly, chefs and restaurant operators price their menu items on a "cost-plus" basis. That is, they calculate the cost to prepare a dish and add on the necessary dollar amount to cover its share of operational, staffing, small wares costs — and, of course, profit.

In the process of a menu audit, you may uncover that your pricing doesn't sufficiently cover the cost to produce a dish. With a

cost-based pricing model, your only recourse may be to increase price independent of what customers might be willing to pay, or cut costs associated with ingredients. While this method can help keep your restaurant in the black, it may also be undercutting potential revenue.

How do your current menu items measure up in price against similar dishes at other establishments in your area? The goal is to never be the most or least expensive option, but it's often possible to move prices up steadily until they match the dish's perceived worth in your market.

If you're careful to assess your items' values correctly, keeping reasonable comparisons in mind (e.g., similar atmosphere, style of service, type of ingredients), you can likely move your pricing up without alarming your customers.

Remember: Like discounting, underpricing can tarnish your brand just as easily as poor preparation or a bad customer service moment. Yes, focusing on value over cost alone is more of an art than a science, but that doesn't mean it's arbitrary. Setting your menu pricing based on actual data on each dish's perceived worth — not just what they cost to produce — will make for a better bottom line.

In our next chapter, we look at yet another factor in whether you could end up building — or eating — your profits: menu **size**.





Size

For many restaurant owners, the question of what to put on their menu is simple. “More is more” is a common mantra among those concerned with satisfying a wide spectrum of tastes and preferences. After all, if you put as many dishes as possible on your menu, your customers can select the exact dish they want. Everyone wins, right?

Well ... the Jam Study says otherwise. Published in 2000, this study by psychologists Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper explored the dynamic between number of choices and sales.⁶

The Jam Study

Two displays were put up, each on a different day. The first display had 24 different kinds of jam – anyone who tried a jam was given a

\$1 coupon. The second display had the same deal, except the jam varieties went down to six. While the 24 item display seemed to gather more attention, people at the six item display were 10 times more likely to buy jam.

While “the Paradox of Choice” is a complicated topic, and you should look at various factors when adjusting your menu, there are several benefits to simplifying your menu that will have a positive impact on your guests, your staff, and your bottom line.⁷

Offering too many choices can cause significant problems for quick serve and fast casual restaurants. Whether ordering at the cash register or in the drive-thru, guests confronted with an overwhelming menu — especially first time visitors — can slow down your line of customers.

Having long lines might make you look popular, but lines that are too long can also deter potential customers passing by from waiting to order. And as the Jam Study indicates, there's also the chance that the guest will give up and leave without ordering anything at all.

And it's not just quick serve/fast casual establishments that have to worry about too many menu items. While social pressure makes guests of casual or fine dining establishments far less likely to leave before ordering, indecisiveness driven by large menu size can still cause problems.

A guest needing more time to choose means more touch points for the server with the customer, more complex timing for the server to the kitchen, that much longer for the order to be put in, more time until the meal is served, and less opportunity for the table to be turned over. Fewer table turns every night means fewer checks paid, and that means less profit. But it's not just a revenue problem.

Going out to eat should be enjoyable, but trying to take in all the different choices on a menu and paring down the choices

before the server comes back can be nerve-racking and hurt the overall experience for your customers.



Your Operations and Brand

Overly complicated menus can also be a strain on both the serving and kitchen staff. Servers should be able to answer a reasonable number of menu questions guests might have, but that part of the job gets much harder if there are dozens and dozens of items they'll need to memorize.

Meanwhile, back of house employees need to be trained consistently in how to prepare every item on the menu. Cooks become experts at dishes when they're able to make them repeatedly during service. It throws a wrench into a shift when a random menu item that's rarely ordered (but remains on the menu anyway) gets ordered.

Of course, overloading your menu presents another big problem: it could muddle your brand. Let's say you're a Chinese fast casual restaurant. You have traditional Chinese





If a restaurant's best dish is buried among a plethora of other choices, guests might not realize it's even there.

cuisine, but you've also decided to include American staples: pizza, spicy chicken wings, French fries, etc.

While it might seem like a good idea ("something for everyone") to offer variety, the message your guests could receive is that your kitchen isn't confident enough in the cuisine they should be making. Every item on your menu should reinforce your core brand in one way or another. It is a better strategy to build your brand on your excellent Chinese dishes, rather than trying to be everything for everyone.

Besides which, the food cost for ingredients that are only used in one dish can be prohibitive, which is likely the case if a dish strays outside your core brand. If you find that dish is rarely picked by guests, the ingredients could spoil before you ever get around to using them. Then you'll have to reorder that ingredient from your vendor so it's on hand on the off chance someone will order it.

Ultimately, large menus run the risk of hiding the best items from your establishment. If one of a restaurant's best dishes is buried among a plethora of other choices, guests might glance over that section without realizing it's even there.

Your opportunity for good word of mouth dies when your best dish isn't highlighted enough on the menu. It's your golden opportunity to stand out. Don't waste it.

Not every opportunity is a permanent part of your menu, however. As we see in the next chapter, there's a lot of opportunity for profit through focusing on limited time offers tied to **seasonality**.



Seasonality

Did you know that 59 percent of consumers say they're more likely to purchase an item on a restaurant menu if it's described as "seasonal"? In fact, 49 percent also said "seasonal" menu items are more appetizing, and another 39 percent believe "seasonal" dishes are healthier.⁸

Considering some of the biggest trends in the restaurant industry today, this data isn't surprising. Across both the full-service and limited-service segments, natural, locally-sourced ingredients and sustainability are skyrocketing in popularity — and profitability.

And, given the limited availability of these ingredients, restaurant owners and operators are now feeling greater pressure to build some level of seasonality and flexibility into their menus.

The demand from consumers is obvious. But what's the best way to manage these regular updates to your restaurant's offerings? Below, we explain how to make the most of your seasonal menus and increase your restaurant sales.

Stand Out in a Crowd

When your business model includes seasonal menu updates, marketing your restaurant and boosting your brand awareness becomes much more straightforward. Build up anticipation for your new menu launch with a series of teasers posted across all your social media platforms. Then, when you make the big release announcement, include links to and pictures of dishes from the new menu with every post.

Throughout the season, continue to post photos of your seasonal menu items to promote LTOs. And, as the season winds down, boost interest in the menu with a “get it before it’s gone” message — while still building buzz for your next new menu.

Restaurants that succeed at seasonality tend to think outside the box when it comes to menu updates. Nearly every coffee shop has some version of a pumpkin spice latte from September to November, but pumpkin flavors aren’t limited to beverages and desserts.



In fact, pumpkin is appearing on 162 percent more appetizer menus, 92 percent more entrée menus, and 53 percent more menus overall, compared with 4 years ago.⁹ Dishes like curry pumpkin bisque, pumpkin tortellini, and even pumpkin mac and cheese make this seasonal favorite better than basic — and are a great way to entice customers seeking a taste of fall flavors.

To make your dishes stand apart from your competitors’ offerings, investigate the availability of ingredients during each season, factoring in your geographic area and access to local sources.¹⁰ For example, fall brings a variety of rich produce like beets, Brussels sprouts, and pomegranate, as well as gamier proteins like lamb, duck, and mussels.

The most important step is finding a vendor with fresh, local ingredients that you can trust.

Experiment with all the ways you can incorporate these ingredients into your menu, and use them across several dishes. Not only does this tie together your menu, it also helps reduce waste and keeps your operations more sustainable — in turn lowering food costs and further increasing profits.

Optimize from Farm to Print

The most important step to take when implementing seasonal menus is finding a vendor you can trust to provide fresh, local ingredients each season. By developing relationships with farmers and other

suppliers, you'll have more confidence in the quality of what you purchase — and could gain access to special deals or new offerings that can make your LTOs extra special.

Although not all of your ingredients need to be locally sourced, having reliable access to these ingredients reduces the stress of managing inventory and qualifies your restaurant as a more sustainable — and healthy — operation in the eyes of a consumer.



Another important piece of the seasonality puzzle is printing your new menus. If you're only featuring a few specials each quarter, consider printing an additional single sheet of your seasonal offerings or an insert to include with your existing menu.

However, if you're making significant changes to your offerings and prices, you'll want to reprint your entire menu. No matter which route you choose, however, look to print about two menus for every

three guests. This provides extra inventory if menus are torn, worn, lost, or stolen.

Updating your menu seasonally not only helps your business benefit from new items, it also sets an ideal timeline for analyzing your entire menu each quarter. Look to see how items have performed year over year, as well as how each item has performed over the quarter, to identify which dishes are your "stars" (items that are highly popular and profitable) versus your "dogs" (items that are less popular and profitable).

Also take the time each quarter to evaluate whether your menu design needs to be updated with a fresh look and optimized layout. Ultimately, knowing what has worked in the past helps you make informed decisions when creating new items for your menu, or even freshening up your current one.

Stay Nimble

Your back-of-house team obviously needs to be aware of menu changes so they can execute the new dishes properly, but don't forget to train your front-of-house staff — especially servers — on the updates, as well. The best way to get everyone on board, and sprinkle in some team building, is by hosting an all-employee tasting.

As the front-line marketers for your menu, your servers need to know every detail about the new dishes they'll be recommending to your customers. While your servers are trying the dishes, be sure to describe each item in the way that can be

used with a customer, so each staff member can respond appropriately when a diner asks what a dish is like or requests a personal recommendation.

Finally, when shifting your restaurant business model to focus on seasonality, you need to consider the impact frequent updates and these fresh, local ingredients will have on your back-of-house equipment and kitchen design. You may need to switch between simmering stews in the winter and chilling ceviche in the summer, so prepare your kitchen and staff to handle these operational shifts with the right procedures and equipment.

Since these local, fresh ingredients may have a shorter shelf life and higher cost, they also need to be optimized to their full use to balance the added expense. If you find that certain seasonal ingredients take longer prep time, make sure your kitchen crew is trained on how to handle these ingredients efficiently. To optimize production, you may also need to reorganize the layout of certain stations.

Looking at your operations with this year-round perspective, while keeping in mind the day-to-day details, will keep everything running smoothly season after season.





Conclusion

And what about nutritional labeling?

The decisions about your menu aren't always going to be about profit. Sometimes, changes will need to be made because of availability concerns or even changes in local and national law.

Along those lines, the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) guidelines will now require nutritional menu labeling for specific kinds of restaurants throughout the United States.¹¹ Specifically, menus should include calorie information for each item and be prepared to offer additional printed nutritional data per customer request.

The restaurants that are required by law to comply are:

- Part of a chain of 20 locations or more
- Doing business under the same brand name as those 20+ locations

- Offering a consistent menu across all locations

However, many restaurants that don't fall under the requirements are still adding menu labeling themselves. A big reason for this push is the trend of transparency and authenticity in food.

Many consumers want to know exactly what they're putting into their bodies when they go out to eat. They don't want to be blind to their own eating choices, especially when they're not making the food themselves. On top of that, customers want to feel that they can trust the businesses they support – being open about what your menu is really like encourages that trust in your brand.

And menu labeling doesn't mean your calorie-heavy items will get rejected by

the masses if you list its nutritional data – many customers will still order those kinds of dishes, but appreciate the transparency between business and consumer.

If you're planning to include nutritional labeling in your restaurant's menu, there are a few ways to calculate those numbers for each dish. What you choose depends on the size of your menu, your budget, and your staff.

You can:

Acquire an analysis from a nutritional laboratory. These are professionals, scientists with extensive backgrounds in testing ingredients who are trained specifically to help provide restaurants with accurate nutritional analysis. They can also test not just a dish as a whole, but each of the components – so if you want to, say, include how many calories the salad dressing serving is compared to the rest of the chopped salad, a nutrition lab can get you that information.

Hire a computerized nutrition vendor. Getting a computerized nutrition analysis is a similar but less specialized option compared to lab testing. This analysis is still done by a professional who is highly experienced in culinary science, but allows for easier adjustments if you adjust any recipes down the line. Like lab testing, off-site computer analysis is still on the expensive side – it can be worth it for many restaurants, but make sure to look at your finances to ensure you have the funds to do so.

Cost software. Going outside your company is often a good idea, but it's not the only solution to menu labeling. Look at the software you already use in your kitchen.

Many software programs for costing out dishes include a nutrition function as well. Just be aware that this software does require someone among your staff to be trained in certain areas of culinary nutrition in order to use the program properly.



Once you've calculated this information and have included it on your menus, it's crucial that the menu items continue to reflect that information. That means training your kitchen staff to be diligent in consistently making your recipes the same every single time they make a dish.

Not only will this ensure you're giving your customers accurate information, but it will also help make sure that your diner gets the right flavors for that dish every time they order it.

Endnotes

¹ "Two Factors that Impact Return Visits to Restaurants" – RewardsNetwork.com

² "The 80/20 Restaurant" – LinkedIn.com

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⁸ "Making the Most of the Seasons" – Restaurant-hospitality.com

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can help your restaurant grow?

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