

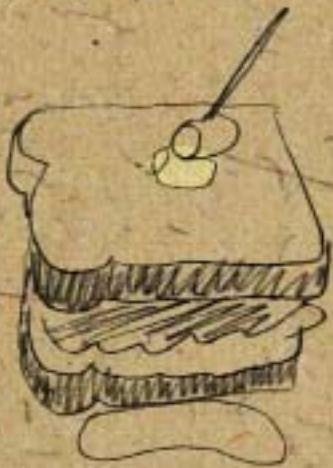
MENU

trina's chopped salad
arugula and spinach
buffalo wings
corn chowder

\$

sides & snacks

old bay style baby shrimp



dogs

griddled dog

corn dog

chili cheese dog

tofu pup

dog of the day

mac&cheese



burgers

lettuce, tomato, onion, pickles

4

charlie-style

sandwich

pressed green apple,
brie sandwich

BLT
smoked bacon



Blueprint Special

THE METHOD BEHIND STARLITE'S MENU

BY NICK ALTSCHULLER / ILLUSTRATIONS BY KATY LEMAY/AGOODSON.COM

BOARDROOM MEETINGS dish out a special kind of boredom. As if God lodged conference-table Danishes in their esophagi, the captives look desperate and dull, like fish slapping at the stern of a boat. Now resuscitate that image, transfer it to the restaurant world, and watch the color return. Replace stale bagels with bacon-wrapped meat loaf. Swap tall glasses of still water with cold bottles of Miller High Life.

A month before Trina's Starlite Lounge opens in Inman Square, the team gathers in the dining room of the Green Street Grill. On one side of the table sits Josh Childs—a 20-year industry veteran and co-owner of downtown's popular Silvertone—and Greg Reeves, Green Street's executive chef and Starlite's chef consultant. In the banquette sit chef de cuisine Suzi Maitland, managing partner J Bellao and partner/owners Beau Sturm, and his wife, the eponymous Trina. The ages range between 27 and 43, but under sun-tans, caps or tattoos, everyone looks at least five years younger.

The team is redrafting the menu, tweaking prices and language. Within minutes, the candlelit air is clouded with industry terms. Upsell. Piggyback. Efficiency value. Soon the meeting becomes a volley

between Beau Sturm, who, fit, inked and soul-patched, gives the impression he arrived in an old Jeep Wrangler with a surfboard on top, and Reeves, who, as he holds court, looks like Dustin Pedroia with restless leg syndrome.

Burgers will come as singles, double or triples, but Sturm wants to know if their description will read beef or Angus. "Beef burgers, it doesn't really say anything," Reeves declares. "Angus, we know from the tasting, doesn't really mean anything, but it makes you feel a little better about it."

Reeves has an analytical mind. He's the type to casually drop into conversation that his drive to the restaurant was 13.8 miles. So as the issue of burger wording turns to burger pricing, he spouts: "Burgers are like \$3.10 per pound. Each

patty is four ounces, which means there's four patties for three bucks, so to even get a triple, you're really only getting \$2.66 of meat, so even if we're losing some on a slice of American cheese, we're already killing it." Translation: a burger will cost \$4.

The team makes a point of highlighting catchwords. The buffalo wings will come with "Great Hill Blue" cheese and Trina's chopped salad will be composed with "local" vegetables. Semantics are debated.

"So the salad is local veg, buttermilk dressing and boiled egg?" Sturm asks.

"Technically it's a hard-cooked egg," Reeves counters. "You ever seen an egg boil?"

Any bumps along the road are like pennies on a railway. Regarding Trina's salad, Reeves explains, "Sorry, but your name is going

to be stamped on everything, get ready for it."

"I eat more burgers than I eat salads," she contends.

"That's a girl," Childs says.

It's an hour in before the first roadblock, as Bellao interjects about the size of the sides. With a \$4 side of fries, the \$8 smoked turkey BLT swiftly becomes a \$12 meal. With fries being dealt in big portions, how's a single diner supposed to approach his choices? Explains Bellao, "I'm trying to keep the price down and half a plate of food out of the trash."

"Well, molding a menu after a single person is not what you want to do," Reeves counters.

"I get an eight-dollar sandwich, I expect something with it. I'm talking the smallest little insubstantial pile of anything. A single French fry."

Tossed product is lost opportunity for profit. Split sizes complicate kitchen logistics. More orders require more labor to cut, brine, blanch and fry in equipment also needed for other items. Suddenly, the simple French fry has entangled the team in the web of menu planning, where plans for a \$30 sack of potatoes have repercussions across the whole enterprise.

STEP 1. DRAFTING

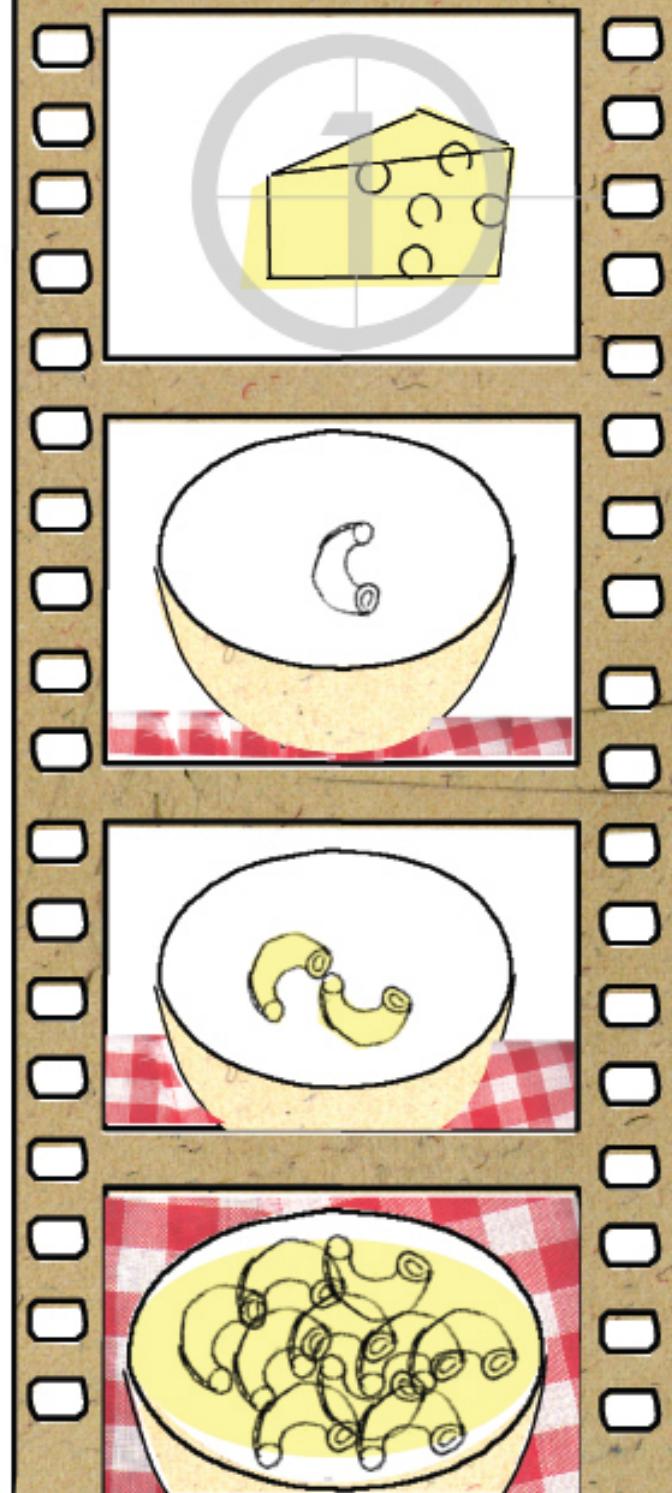
David Shinney, owner of DCS Associates, is a hospitality and restaurant consultant with 30 years of industry experience. Based in Boston, he's worked with local restaurants and projects as far away as Miami and Prague. According to Shinney, concept is key—and should be determined before a menu gets drafted. "What are you? What are you trying to do? What's your style of operation? Every menu has to flow from the concept," he explains.

As Childs describes it, Starlite "is inspired by the '50s, but not overly reflective of them." It's the classic diner pulled into this century, a place where the bar serves pony bottles of Bud alongside the modern, crafted cocktail. As for the inclusion of Trina's name, well, the team just likes the syncopation.

First crack at the menu was given to Beau Sturm, who attacked the process with the insight of someone who's bartended since age 16 and loved the business since long before that. "When I was growing up in West Virginia, I played Pop Warner football and baseball for the Bridge Tavern," Sturm says. "The Bridge is where we went for our pizza parties afterward. The Bridge is where my dad went to drink on Tuesday nights. The Bridge is where Christenings and confirmations happened, so that would be the best-case scenario for me. That we would be the place that the neighborhood grew around."

To meet that image, Sturm's first instinct was to create a menu that he'd enjoy. He produced a voluminous list with items like the pepperoni roll, a coal-miner favorite. Thanks to a barbecue shack near his brother in South Carolina, he developed an addiction to fried chicken and waffles, and in the name of research, he visited soul-food spots throughout Harlem. The result is an anchor dish for the menu, one that's predicted to be popular, so the price can be nudged to \$17 to help Starlite's margins.

With a love for eating put aside, a restaurant is a business, and



food cost is the crucial statistic. A steakhouse, where the prime product doesn't come cheap, aims to spend 30 to 40 percent of monthly sales on food purchases. Starlite is aiming for around 25 percent. And on a menu where the addition or subtraction of a dollar makes a significant difference, meeting goals means balancing both perceived and actual value.

An entrée of mac 'n' cheese is a perceived value for the customer at \$9. For the business, it's a mixture of inexpensive ingredients bought in bulk, meaning a healthy profit even at single-digit pricing. On the other hand, a sirloin steak (\$19) will cost the customer more than twice as much, which puts more than twice as much money in the register. But with the cost of the

meat, the actual profit doesn't cover much more than the price of the chef's time to cook it. The hope is to create a menu where customers are enticed to explore a variety of options, so that high and low margins are averaged to a point where the restaurant achieves a healthy percentage.

With so many logistics at play, Sturm's initial screed had to be streamlined. A dreamer's list of hot dogs, dozens of them (some topped with kimchi, others made from Kobe), was whittled down as Reeves stepped in to edit. "I was the general manager at the Metropolitan Club, and I was very involved in food costs, so I'm within 15 cents a portion just knowing offhand what we're doing," Sturm explains. "And Greg is a genius at that. Everywhere that he's been, that's been one of the things that has been embraced by the people he's worked with, that he's brought costs down by walking in the door."

STEP 2. PRODUCTION

"If you're an artist, you've got to pay for that canvas somehow," Reeves says. Before Green Street, he spent four years with Barbara Lynch as the chef de cuisine at B&G Oysters and the Butcher Shop. With his insight, B&G's kitchen knew it needed 12 gallons of mayo per week and that Pepperidge Farm only delivers if you order bread by the freighter. So it fell to him to condense Sturm's menu, where even a simple offering of three different cheeses would create a multitude of variables on the back end.

Reeves breaks it down at Green Street a couple weeks after the meeting. Filing into the restaurant behind him is a huge early evening party, sure to order dozens of different plates. "By having two less cheeses, that's two less things you have to receive, two less things you have to purchase, two less things you have to inventory, two less things you have to rotate, two less things you have to have on the line, two less ingredients you have to manage in general."

Keeping the menu concise is a key to managing three components

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of a restaurant's operation and success. Primarily, and perhaps most obviously, the food has to taste good, as the goal is to satisfy customers. Secondly, the preparations have to be efficient. The previous French fry dilemma was solved by deciding to put out coleslaw with every sandwich order, but a consideration like hand-cut fries is a time-consuming way Starlite hopes to differentiate itself from the local bar-food competition. To balance the scales, pre-formed patties will be purchased, shaving away the accumulated hours it would take to form burgers by hand.

Then there is the key component of price. Each dish has a pricing formula, and while a consumer may think the two dollars made on an \$8 crab cake goes right into the owner's pocket, there are expenses beyond food cost. Yes, the purveyors need payment, but so do the cooks. Then there are the direct operating expenses. Light bulbs need replacing. Walls need painting. Just delivering a bill requires a paid server, paper, ink, pens and a checkbook. At Starlite, you won't find tablecloths because one, they don't fit the concept, and two, how much leftover money do you want to spend on a linen service?

The resulting maxim for low-cost restaurants like Starlite is simple: Volume solves all. Price a griddled hot dog at \$3, and people won't think twice about ordering three of them. Place snacks and sides—items with

beneficial margins—in their own section on the menu, and it's a like a casino replacing cash with chips. What's another \$3 order of onion rings? Live a little. And of course there's the biggest boon to the industry: booze. Explains Reeves, "People will bitch about the 12-dollar glass of wine, but no one bitches about the five-dollar Amstel."

Under the surface of the menu are cost-cutting connections like cross-utilization, where an item like black-bean chili appears not only as an appetizer but as a condiment for fries, dogs and burgers. Ideally, the customer doesn't notice these things, as the menu ultimately gets tailored down to the enticing specifics.

STEP 3. DESIGN

As a restaurant's true entry point, a menu should be clean and easy to manage. Disorder can trip up a diner's experience before the meal even begins.

"Like I went to Scampo," Reeves begins. "The food is delicious, but you read the menu and you've got some things in bold, they use some funny words, and they use no words sometimes, like lobster pizza, and another pizza has 17 things on it.

"Or you ever eaten at Pigalle? Whenever I read the menu, I'm like, nothing really looks that good to me. And I get my food, and I'm like f***, this shit's the bomb."

Starlite's menu is aimed at the classic business practice of under-promising and over-delivering, as a brief description like "fried chicken and buttermilk waffles, hot-pepper syrup" informs but lets the mind wander. Will there be a breast and a drumstick? A drumstick and a thigh? Bone in or bone out? And when the entire half-chicken arrives, the customers' expectations are met in a way that both surprises and satisfies their hunger.

THE END TO any great meal is a subject for debate.

As the meeting winds down, Sturm's body language deflates and in a soft, reluctant voice he brings the final point to order. "Then the last thing is the thing I don't want to talk about, but pie...."

Maitland and Trina Sturm, who worked in an East Boston bakery as 12-year-olds, are dead set on dessert. Childs, who stopped serving apple pie and ice-cream sandwiches within Silvertone's first year, is dead set against it. Points are discussed. Alternatives are presented.

"Why not put it on the menu and see how it works, and if it doesn't work then fine," Maitland suggests.

Beau Sturm counters, "Well if it works, that's my worst nightmare, 'cause now I'm not getting my turns."

In Shinney's view as a consultant, "It is part of a meal, and people, even though we're somewhere in a recession, still order sweets." And it's not like giving it away for free was ever a consideration. "Lotta margin in dessert. If that's going

to greatly impact your revenue, I might not offer it, but I'd be hard-pressed not to."

Although a businessman who sees success in variety and volume, Reeves seems to share Shinney's vision. Not offering pie leads to a quicker turnover, but whose to say there'll be another party at the end of the night? You could save 90 minutes for a profit of zero, or you could extend the stay of three parties, giving them more time to enjoy your hospitality, and sell \$24 worth of dessert. "Maybe they buy pie and they buy that shot of Fernet, too," Reeves posits. "Now that's a very profitable piece of pie, you know?"

While Reeves sees diners indulging at the tables, Childs sees potential customers stewing by the door. "Customers always think when you're trying to move them in and out that you're trying to get as many seatings as possible to make as much profit as we can," he says later. "They say, 'Oh, you don't want me to have another drink at the table?' Well, actually, we make more money if you have another drink at the table, but I'm worried about Joe and Sarah who've been waiting an hour for dinner. I need to accommodate them, to make them happy here."

Another minor savings for a place like Starlite is that there's no need to buy a reservation book. A fine-dining establishment, meanwhile, has their turns established on paper before service even begins. They know how the evening will be paced and are only too happy to let you linger over the panna cotta trio and \$30 glass of port. Now, whether the end of Starlite's bar acts as a pedestal for a spinning display case or a way station for hungry visitors will take some time to be finalized. No pie at the moment, but menus can always be changed.

"Maybe it's something we can approach later," Trina Sturm concedes. The energy at the Green Street meeting is flagging and entrées are on their way. "I'd just like to keep in the back of everybody's mind that pie is delicious and don't forget that."

Childs smirks and suggests, "Pie of the day? Twenty-five bucks." ***