Get with the program

Associate FCSI member **John Reed** discusses why the needs of an operator must always be considered when redesigning a menu program

T he typical life span of a menu concept or programming can range from one to five years, depending on the style and type of foodservice operation that is being considered. In contract foodservice, the life span of a core menu design is a little longer as there are limitations put on the operator that they may not have control of.

One of those is the configuration of the kitchen and foodservice facilities. Most foodservice contractors are using equipment and facilities they do not own and have minimal impact on the decision of why certain equipment is there. Design professionals are generally brought into a project long before the menu may be considered. In doing so, we are making long-term menu decisions that have considerable influence on food offerings. Some decisions have more future impact than the latest food trend that can be gone by tomorrow or before the operator has a chance to create a menu.

When consultants are asked to help with menu design or redesign we would prefer the menu be written first and then a facility designed around it. In most cases this is difficult to achieve. In this understanding of reality, there needs to be a logical approach to menu design that considers many different factors.

Identifying key influencers from many areas such as customer demographics and marketplace are incorporated to create a "menu decision tree".

This is an approach from the ground up that consolidates needs, influencers and capabilities of an operation to help create a series of checks and balances for the culinary team to adhere to for menu and recipe development that are in-line with the overall goals of the operation.

The most overlooked process in this is listening and interpreting the actual needs of an operator. The first major piece of information that must be dissected is the initial request for proposal (RFP) of the menu design project. Is the menu being created to make a culinary statement or is just a function of the business?

With that established, the following six steps are key to great menu design.

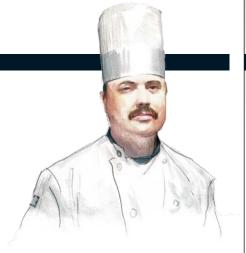**Identify the factors affecting the menu design**
- Social and consumer demands
- Economic factors of procurement and price point
- Current or future facilities
- Geography
- Food production skill sets

Create the decision tree
Four to six key influencers are defined and articulated to provide the roadmap for the whole operational team. This includes procurement, HR, marketing, culinary, service and accounting.

On one of our latest projects we defined the following influencers (they were used to create a new menu program for an established dining services provider): appreciative/authentic; desirable; balanced; simple/clean; well-being; and seasonal adaptability.

Develop a culinary directive
From the decision tree, the culinary team was charged with creating a standard operating procedure (SOP) whereby procurement, production and presentation of the food could be held accountable to defined influencers.

Write focus statements
Consulting, operations and culinary teams made a set of small-scale focus statements around individual parts of the menu program. Recipes, ingredients specifications, presentations and menu descriptors were matched to the focus statements. Consider this example of a focus statement: "Station 1: Clean, locally-sourced proteins and toppings prepared on a griddle or char-grill in a simple classic style with house-baked rolls, simple embellishment, self-serve signature sauces and value. Not QSR but worth the wait!"

This is a clear and focused message on the expectations of the menu design.

Be creative and write the menu. Finally, conduct a litmus test against the decision tree and statements ■

John Reed CEC®, CCA®, Certified Cicerone®, is the owner of Customized Culinary Solutions in Skokie, Illinois, US **customizedculinarysolutions.com**

DAN MURRELL