

The city's best restaurants and bars

READ it and EAT

Never mind what's on the menu—the menus themselves are making impressions at these NYC restaurants

By James Oliver Cury Photographs by Harry Pocius

First-time diners at davidburke & donatella are often surprised when they get their menus and find that someone has scribbled all over them. David Burke's kids didn't do the damage, the chef himself did—to show everyone what he was thinking when he conceptualized the dishes. It's a glimpse into the mind of the culinary prankster, who conjures up playful dishes such as cheesecake lollipops with bubble-gum whipped cream. Burke draws crude pictures of the daily specials on the menu, illustrating where various ingredients sit and adding notes (like "Hong Kong style" next to the words *XO sauce*) for added clarity. "It's like handing a note to my sous chef saying 'Don't mess that up' and 'Light on that sauce,'" Burke says. "These are all the details that the customer can't usually read because the menu would be pages long."

Many other restaurateurs have replaced the tried-and-true folded laminates with out-of-the-ordinary menus—sheets of metal, conceptual works of art, even footballs. It's hard for any restaurant to stand out in this town, so we can hardly blame them for trying to make a lasting first impression.

Sheet smart

Burke borrowed the idea of drawing on the menu from a few famous predecessors. Legendary chef Jean-Louis Palladin handwrote his French menus at Washington, D.C.'s Watergate Hotel. "You couldn't read his writing, but it looked great," Burke says. And many famous artists have contributed menu covers to Chanterelle over the years: Cy Twombly in 1980, Keith Haring in 1984, John Cage in 1986, Marcel Marceau in 1987 and Allen Ginsberg in 1993. Celebrities occasionally enter Burke's world, too: One recent night, when Burke knew that celebrity chef Bobby Flay would be dining, he added a "Hey, Bobby" among his scribbles. Burke says the visuals will continue indefinitely at **davidburke & donatella** (133 E 61st St between Park and Lexington Aves, 212-813-2121). He may even add color and take drawing lessons. Can scratch-and-sniff be far away?

A simple request to discuss the clipboard menu at the Nolita hot spot **Public** (210 Elizabeth St between Prince and Spring Sts, 212-343-7011) led to a highbrow dissertation on public spaces, global markets and municipal systems. William Harris, creative director at Avroko design firm and a partner at Public, passionately explained how he visited public



Public



Mix in New York

libraries, thrift shops, museums and antiques stores to find just the right fonts and design elements for the menus. The result is a narrow clipboard with a single manila card listing the day's dishes; it looks like an old-fashioned office-supply form. Harris labored over every detail. He chose the Courier font, he says, because it references a simpler time. The clipboard needed to feel good in the hand, and he also wanted it to look old, so he had each clip hand-burnished to give it a dull, used appearance. He decided to perforate the cards, too, to make them look authentic. Though it has been open for only three months, the restaurant has been through 12 iterations of the menu—and as at any good public library, the staff keeps records of each edition in a card catalog.

Sometimes a menu can be conceptualized to a fault, such that it fails to perform its most basic function: telling you what's for dinner. Menus at Alain Ducasse's **Mix in New York** (68 W 58th St between Fifth and Sixth Aves, 212-583-0300) list French and American classic dishes, like duck à l'orange and mac and cheese, on paper menus covered with bright pink, bendable, translucent plastic covers that function as an overlay. The plastic is printed with section names like "DINNER - diner." Designers Philippe David and



Pampano

Asiate

Patrick Jouin explain the two-part system: The protective sheath holds half of the information (the section names) and the printed menu holds the rest—you need to *mix* the two parts to make a whole. Unfortunately, the sheath is a tad dark, making it difficult to read the dishes listed underneath unless you bring the menu up to your face or yank the paper out of the cover altogether. Waiters have grown accustomed to diners asking for more light, according to manager Julian Hitchcock. As a result, they now carry mini flashlights at all times, just in case.



Heavy metals

At **Asiate** (80 Columbus Circle at 60th St, at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, 212-805-8881), servers warn diners before handing over a 12-by-15-inch nickel-plated tablet; the thing could probably sever your toes if you dropped it on your foot. The menu is sleek—a single sheet of metal with white leather corners holding an oversize sheet of white paper—and although its design eliminates the need to turn pages, you can't exactly cue the waiter that you're ready to order. If you try to turn the thing over, you're likely to break a wine glass or two. We'll just tell you what's on the back: carvings that look like a tree branch and leaves, intended to match the restaurant interior, explains Patrick Gioannini, director of food and beverage. "Our designer, Tony Chi, had already created a sculpture hanging from the ceiling with branches made of glass," he says. The tree theme evokes nearby Central Park, which you can see from every table. Chi originally played with the idea of printing the menu on a sterling-silver tray—a tie-in to the restaurant's silver-circle logo—but he settled on more affordable and durable stainless steel, instead.

When chef-owner Tom Valenti conceived the menu at his new restaurant **'Cesca** (164 W 75th St between Columbus and Amsterdam Aves, 212-787-6300), he was aiming for an unabashedly rustic look; he did not have a glorious view, high-concept sculpture or logo to

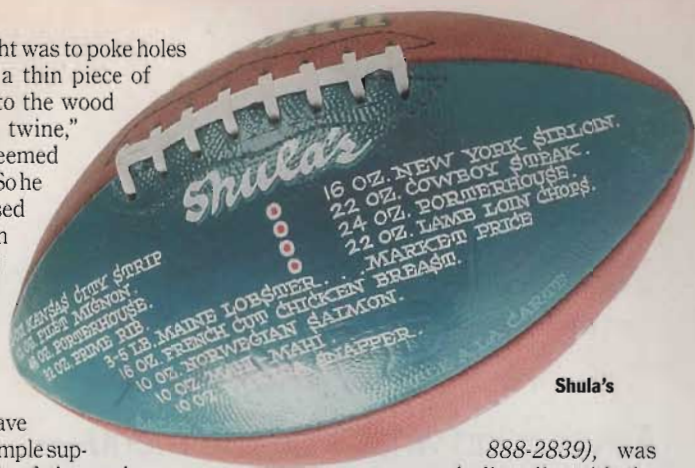
consider. "The first thought was to poke holes through the corners of a thin piece of wood and tie the menu to the wood board using butcher's twine," Valenti says. "But that seemed pretty silly pretty quick." So he opted for a sheet of stressed copper (at \$65 each) with the word *'Cesca* stamped on it—expensive material, but durable considering how rough diners are on menus. While no one has absconded with one yet, Valenti says he'll have no problem tacking on a simple supplement to the bills of those who deem it suitable for framing at home.

It's little wonder why an 11-inch fish is etched into the cover of the metal menu at **Pampano** (209 E 49th St between Second and Third Aves, 212-751-4545); this is Richard Sandoval's Mexican seafood restaurant, and metal is one of the unifying themes of the room. "Richard felt that the restaurant already had all this authentic Mexican metal art—brushed-silver pieces on walls, for example, and silver ceviche dishes—and he wanted to stick with that style," says marketing director Jennifer Danquist. The chef hired metalworkers in Taxco, Mexico, to produce the plates, which have rippled aluminum backgrounds and fish "eyes" of copper. They're beauties, but art collectors must throw these fish back; they're not for sale.

Crazy like that

The idea for the ridiculous menu at **Shula's Steak House** (270 W 43rd St between Seventh and Eighth Aves, 212-201-2776) was born in 1972, the year the Miami Dolphins won the Super Bowl. The Dolphins had a perfect (17-0) season, and coach Don Shula had received his fair share of commemorative "game balls"—footballs with a painted panel detailing the stats of the game. Seventeen years later, when Shula opened his first restaurant in Miami Lakes, Florida, co-owner David Yount decided to print the menu on footballs in the same style as a game ball. The idea wasn't entirely practical, of course: Only a few dish names fit on the thing, so waiters at the restaurant chain (including a year-old Times Square branch) have to put the football down on a kicking tee and recite the rest of the long lineup. Fans seem to love it. "We sell a fair amount of balls," says co-owner Dave Shula, Don's son. Not that this is Planet Hollywood; the balls cost \$325 each. Attempted theft is not uncommon, Shula says. "We have people who try to slip them in bags or coats, so our waitstaff is also trained in menu surveillance."

Vicky Vij, the copartner of **Bukhara Grill** (217 E 49th St between Second and Third Aves, 212-



Shula's

888-2839), was struck, literally, with the idea for his menu during a visit to India a few years ago. An industrial-size rolling pin fell to the ground near him and cracked in two, producing two identical halves that, when rejoined, resembled a wine bottle. Vij decided to add a hinge to the broken pin, creating a wooden "bottle" that opens up to reveal a wine menu. "It was just a crazy idea," he says. The wood theme carries through the restaurant: The host's podium and many chairs are made of tree trunks, and the food menu resembles the cross-section of a tree. It is heavy, awkward and, let's face it, absurd—as if you're dining in a Fred Flintstone cartoon. Even Vij has mixed feelings about it, lamenting the fact that he can't change the menu offerings very often: "It's hard to print everything on a wooden tablet—it's not like you can redo it for two bucks at Kinko's." On the upside, he can't increase the prices, either. ■



Bukhara Grill

Wine List	
Red Wines	White Wines
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