Original Research

# Masterestaurant analysis of *plate profitability* 2026: median full-service food cost closed at 32.0% (NRA 2025), and that is where the menu is decided

By **Diego F. Parra** · Updated 2026-09-18 · Menu & Menu Engineering


**QUICK VERDICT**

**Plate profitability in 2026 is not won by cutting food cost: it is won by knowing WHICH dish defends contribution margin in each channel. Headline figure: median food cost was 32.0% of sales in full service and 32.4% in limited service during 2024, according to National Restaurant Association (Restaurant Operations Report 2025) — nearly identical on paper, yet the cash behaves in opposite directions, because limited service compensates with turns and full service with average check. The cut almost nobody looks at is VOLUME inside the same format: full-service restaurants under USD 2M in sales spent 33.7% on food, while those at USD 2M or above spent 31.0% (National Restaurant Association, 2025). Those 2.7 points are not kitchen discipline, they are purchasing power and diluted waste. Verdict: cost every portion with a standard recipe, rank the menu by contribution margin in currency rather than percentage, and treat each channel —dining room, Google Maps, Rappi, Uber Eats, DiDi— as a separate P&L for the same plate.**

A dish does not have one profitability; it has three or four, one per channel. The same steak that leaves a 62% contribution margin in the dining room can land at 28% once a delivery app loads commission, packaging and promotion on top, and none of that shows up in a spreadsheet that tracks food cost alone. The public conversation is still anchored to raw material percentage when the real 2026 decision is about MIX: which dish you push on your Google Business Profile, which one rides the first screen of the Rappi menu, which one survives in the printed menu and which one quietly leaves.

This analysis synthesizes public data from National Restaurant Association (2025), Circana (2024 and 2025), Datassential (2025), International Food Information Council (2025), USDA (2025), Cornell University (2009) and TouchBistro (2024), organized by segment and channel with the reading of Diego F. Parra and the Masterestaurant framework. There is no primary data here: the numbers belong to those organizations, the interpretation is ours, and the line between the two stays explicit in every finding.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

## Side-by-side comparison

| | BEFORE: A MENU WITH NO PORTION COSTING | AFTER: A MENU RANKED BY CONTRIBUTION MARGIN AND CHANNEL |
|---|---|---|
| **Format food cost (full service, median)** | ✕ Managed by feel against an imaginary 30%; the real sector figure was 32.0% of sales in 2024 (National Restaurant Association, 2025) | ✓ Every portion is costed against the real 32.0% median and the 28-35% optimal range (National Restaurant Association), dish by dish |
| **Volume effect inside the same format** | ✕ An independent operator assumes its 33.7% means a kitchen out of control (National Restaurant Association, 2025) | ✓ It benchmarks against its own bracket: 33.7% under USD 2M versus 31.0% from USD 2M (National Restaurant Association, 2025), then renegotiates purchasing |
| **Dispersion by concept** | ✕ One cost target for the whole menu, no distinction by format | ✓ The range by concept is applied: QSR 25-30%, casual 30-34%, fine dining 34-40% (National Restaurant Association) |
| **High-margin items on the menu** | ✕ Pizza and dough items are sold under the same logic as expensive protein | ✓ The 15% to 20% food cost band of pizza over menu price is identified (Sauce, 2025) and given position plus photos on the local listing |

| | BEFORE: A MENU WITH NO PORTION COSTING | AFTER: A MENU RANKED BY CONTRIBUTION MARGIN AND CHANNEL |
|---|---|---|
| **Beef protein cost** | ✕ The cut price is reviewed once a year and the dish stays mispriced for months | ✓ Repriced against the real cycle: the US cattle herd sits at ≈86 million head, its lowest since the 1950s (USDA, 2025) |
| **Pricing lever in menu design** | ✕ Prices with currency signs, right-aligned like a grocery list | ✓ The dollar sign is removed: +8.15% spend per person measured by Cornell University, School of Hotel Administration (2009) |
| **Response to rising costs** | ✕ The whole menu is repriced at once and traffic drops | ✓ The sector's first move is replicated, switching suppliers, used by 40% of operators (TouchBistro, 2024), before touching price |
| **Demand that drives the mix** | ✕ The menu reflects what the chef likes | ✓ It aligns with documented demand: 70% want more protein (International Food Information Council, 2025) and 65% like spicy food (Datassential, 2025) |

## Finding 1 — The 2024 median food cost tells you nothing about which dish feeds you

Median food cost at full-service restaurants closed 2024 at 32.0% of sales and limited service at 32.4%, per the National Restaurant Association's Restaurant Operations Report 2025, and those two near-identical figures are exactly what makes the metric useless for menu decisions. A raw-material percentage tells you what production costs; it never tells you what stays in the till when service ends. A beef plate carrying 38% food cost on a 26-dollar ticket returns more contribution margin in dollars than a pasta at 22% on an 11-dollar ticket, and your bank account fills with dollars, never with percentages. Rank your menu by absolute contribution per unit sold, cross that column against real unit counts from the last quarter, and the whole ranking flips on you. Profitability fragments the moment you open channels, and no food cost spreadsheet captures that.

## Finding 2 — A dish has no single profitability: it has one per channel

The same beef tenderloin defending 62% contribution margin in the dining room can drop to 28% once it travels through a delivery app loading commission, thermal packaging and the monthly promotion on top, while the raw-material percentage never budged a single point along the way. With consumer restaurant spending up just 2% in 2024 against flat traffic, according to Circana, the win no longer comes from selling more units but from deciding which dish you push at each door. Calculate contribution margin by channel before you negotiate the next campaign with any aggregator. Public conversation stays anchored to food cost; the 2026 decision is about MIX. Before blaming the cook for losing control, look at your purchasing volume: full-service restaurants under USD 2 million in sales reported 33.7% food cost in 2024, while those at USD 2 million or above landed at 31.0%, per the National Restaurant Association.

### Finding 3 — Your revenue bracket weighs more than your kitchen's discipline

That 2.7-point gap does not come from tighter portioning or from weighing waste with more rigor, it comes from supplier leverage and from turnover that punishes inventory less. Diego F. Parra insists on this order within the Masterestaurant framework because it changes where you intervene: a small venue chasing 31% by trimming grams ends up destroying the very dish that built its reputation. If you bill under two million, your lever is aggregated purchasing and menu mix, not the knife. Every concept lives in its own range: quick service between 25% and 30%, casual between 30% and 34%, fine dining between 34% and 40%, with a healthy operating band of 28% to 35% according to the National Restaurant Association. Applying the QSR target to a fine dining room is a sentence: demand 28% from a kitchen working premium cuts and seasonal product and you get an impoverished menu, a falling ticket and absolute margin sinking while the spreadsheet glows green.

### Finding 4 — The food cost target depends on concept, and picking the wrong range is expensive

What would happen if a casual venue at 32% pushed down to 27% for a quarter? Portions shrink, the three dishes that justified the price disappear, and by month four you hold an immaculate food cost on smaller sales. Set the range by concept first. Argue decimals afterward. Pizza runs 15% to 20% food cost against menu price, per Sauce's 2025 menu engineering analysis, making it the most profitable item by percentage on almost any menu, and still you cannot turn the whole menu into pizza. The high-margin plate pays payroll; the signature plate, costlier to produce, brings in the guest who then orders the high-margin one. The paradox resolves by position, not by elimination: the expensive dish carries the quality perception and owns the first screen, while the cheap-to-produce one gets pushed in the combo and in the digital channel where marginal cost of service runs lower.

### Finding 5 — The tension between the high-margin dish and the dish that fills the room

I spent years recommending that operators pull dishes on isolated food cost. That mistake kills the reason the guest chose the place. Removing the dollar sign from the menu lifted spend per person by 8.15% in the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration study (2009), and that point and a half of margin cost nobody a single gram of product. The same principle runs through the digital channel: Taco Bell reported 20% higher spend on its digital self-service system than at the human register, because a screen never forgets to suggest the side. Per-dish profitability does not end at the recipe card, it ends in how the price is presented and who presents it. Audit your menu this week: if you list prices with a currency symbol and decimals aligned in a column, you are inviting vertical comparison. Write the price attached to the end of the description, symbol-free, and track average ticket for thirty days.

### 2025 demand: protein, heat and less alcohol reorder contribution

Three demand currents are moving which dish deserves defending. Seventy percent of Americans want more protein in 2025, nearly twenty points above three years ago, per the International Food Information Council's Food & Health Survey; 65% say they like or love spicy food, with 34% loving it outright, according to Datassential; and 49% plan to drink less alcohol, up 44% from 2023 per NCSolutions. That last figure hurts, because the bar was carrying dining room margin. If your contribution leaned on wine and cocktails, you need a high-ticket protein plate and a non-alcoholic line with real margin, not a courtesy mocktail. Demand already moved; your menu decides whether it follows. The US cattle herd sits near 86 million head, the lowest since the

1950s according to the USDA (2025), which means your beef plate carries a structural cost floor that will not drop because you negotiated better. Facing cost pressure, 40% of operators responded by switching suppliers in 2024 per TouchBistro, a maneuver that buys months, never years.

### Finding 6 — The cattle herd sets the floor on your beef plate, and you do not control it

The serious answer is a menu answer: cut beef's weight in your sold mix, raise the price of the cut that genuinely defends contribution, and move volume toward proteins with stable supply. Start tomorrow with one measurable action: pull last quarter's units-sold report by dish, multiply each line by its dollar contribution and sort descending. The top five rows are your actual business. Food cost and profitability are not the same metric. Median full-service food cost was 32.0% of sales in 2024 according to National Restaurant Association (2025), yet a dish with 38% food cost and a high check can deliver more contribution margin in currency than one at 22% with a low price. Rank the menu in money, not percentage. The revenue bracket weighs more than kitchen discipline. Full service under USD 2M reported 33.7% food cost and from USD 2M reported 31.0% (National Restaurant Association, 2025): before blaming the cook, look at purchasing power and diluted waste.

### Finding 7 — The differences that move cash, not the talking points

Concept sets the range. QSR runs between 25% and 30%, casual between 30% and 34%, fine dining between 34% and 40% (National Restaurant Association). Applying one concept's target to another is the fastest way to kill a dish that was healthy. Product category changes the arithmetic. Pizza operates between 15% and 20% food cost over menu price (Sauce, 2025), a band no protein reaches; that does not make it a better dish, it makes it a better margin ANCHOR inside a mix. Documented demand beats intuition. Some 70% of consumers want more protein, nearly 20 points more in three years (International Food Information Council, 2025), and 49% plan to drink less alcohol in 2025, up 44% from 2023 (NCSolutions, 2025): the beverage margin you took for granted is under structural pressure. Spending grows, traffic does not. Circana measured +2% consumer restaurant spending in 2024 with flat traffic, and +3% year over year in food and beverage in the first half of 2025: growth came from average check, not more people at the table, and that is precisely what menu engineering knows how to exploit.

### Finding 8 — The differences that move cash, not the talking points — in practice

The digital channel has its own price. The same dish that carries the dining room can lose money in a commissioned app; Taco Bell's digital system recorded 20% more spend per order than the human cashier (Taco Bell / Yum! Brands, 2024), a signal that digital lifts check when the mix is built right and destroys it when it is not.

**POINT BY POINT**

## Compared analysis: which criterion holds the margin in 2026

### METRIC THAT GOVERNS THE DECISION

**A · BEFORE: A MENU WITH NO PORTION COSTING**

Food cost percentage across the whole menu

**B · MASTERESTAURANT** Contribution margin in currency per dish, crossed with units sold

**Verdict:** B wins. With the sector median at 32.0% (National Restaurant Association, 2025), percentage controls purchasing; cash is decided by what each item leaves behind.

### BENCHMARK REFERENCE

**A · BEFORE: A MENU WITH NO PORTION COSTING**

The general sector average, with no bracket

**B · MASTERESTAURANT** Your own revenue bracket: 33.7% under USD 2M versus 31.0% from USD 2M (National Restaurant Association, 2025)

**Verdict:** B wins. Benchmarking against the wrong average blames the kitchen for a gap that belongs to purchasing power.

### HOW THE DELIVERY CHANNEL IS TREATED

**A · BEFORE: A MENU WITH NO PORTION COSTING**

Same price and same mix as the dining room

**B · MASTERESTAURANT** A dedicated P&L per app, with commission, packaging and geo-targeted spend inside the plate cost

**Verdict:** B wins. Digital lifted spend per order 20% in Taco Bell's system (Yum! Brands, 2024), but only when the mix that climbs into the app is costed separately.

## PRICING LEVER

**A · BEFORE: A MENU WITH NO PORTION COSTING**

Linear repricing of the whole menu when cost rises

**B · MASTERESTAURANT** Purchasing renegotiation first, selective adjustment by demand elasticity second

**Verdict:** B wins. It was the first response of 40% of operators in 2024 (TouchBistro), and with flat traffic and +2% spending (Circana, 2024) linear increases punish frequency.

## MENU FORMAT

**A · BEFORE: A MENU WITH NO PORTION COSTING**

QR only, to save printing and change prices fast

**B · MASTERESTAURANT** Printed menu to govern the experience, plus QR as a complement for delivery, accessibility and analytics

**Verdict:** B wins outright. Printed menu design moves spend per person 8.15% with a single typographic change (Cornell University, 2009); a QR does not control service pace.

## MENU MIX

**A · BEFORE: A MENU WITH NO PORTION COSTING**

Whatever the chef likes and whatever was always there

**B · MASTERESTAURANT** Documented demand: 70% want more protein (International Food Information Council, 2025), 65% like spicy food (Datassential, 2025)

**Verdict:** B wins. Stated protein preference climbed nearly 20 points in three years; a menu that ignores it leaves average check on the table.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

### Before: the menu nobody costed by portion DIAGNOSIS

- ✕ Plate cost is calculated from the last purchase price, with no waste, no yield and no by-product value.
- ✕ A whole-menu food cost target is chased instead of the contribution margin in currency of each individual item.
- ✕ Delivery runs at dining-room prices: app commission, packaging and geo-targeted promotion eat the margin with nobody tracking it per dish.
- ✕ The Google Business Profile shows photos of the dishes the team finds pretty, not the ones carrying the cash.
- ✕ Expensive protein items stay on out of pride even though the US cattle herd sits at ≈86 million head, its lowest since the 1950s (USDA, 2025), with cost moving constantly.
- ✕ When cost rises, the whole menu is repriced at once instead of renegotiating purchasing, the first strategy chosen by 40% of operators (TouchBistro, 2024).

### After: a menu governed by margin, channel and real demand MASTERESTAURANT

- ✓ Every dish carries a standard recipe with yield, waste and updated portion costing, benchmarked against the 28-35% optimal range from National Restaurant Association.
- ✓ The menu is ranked by contribution margin in currency and crossed with actual POS popularity: classic menu engineering, run on your own sales data.
- ✓ Each channel gets its own math: dining room, pickup, Rappi, Uber Eats and DiDi carry different prices and mixes because they carry different cost structures.
- ✓ Star items take the top slots in the delivery app and the lead photos on the local listing, where the algorithm and the guest both decide in seconds.
- ✓ Menu design applies what Cornell University measured in 2009: without a currency sign, spend per person rises 8.15%.
- ✓ The printed menu stays as control of the experience and the QR comes in as a complement: two roles, not a replacement.

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THE NUMBERS THAT MATTER

## The scorecard: six external figures that order plate profitability

**32.0%**

Median full-service food cost as share of sales (2024)

**33.7%**

Food cost in full service with sales under USD 2M (2024)

**31.0%**

Food cost in full service with sales of USD 2M or more (2024)

**8.15%**

Higher spend per person when the currency sign leaves the menu

**40%**

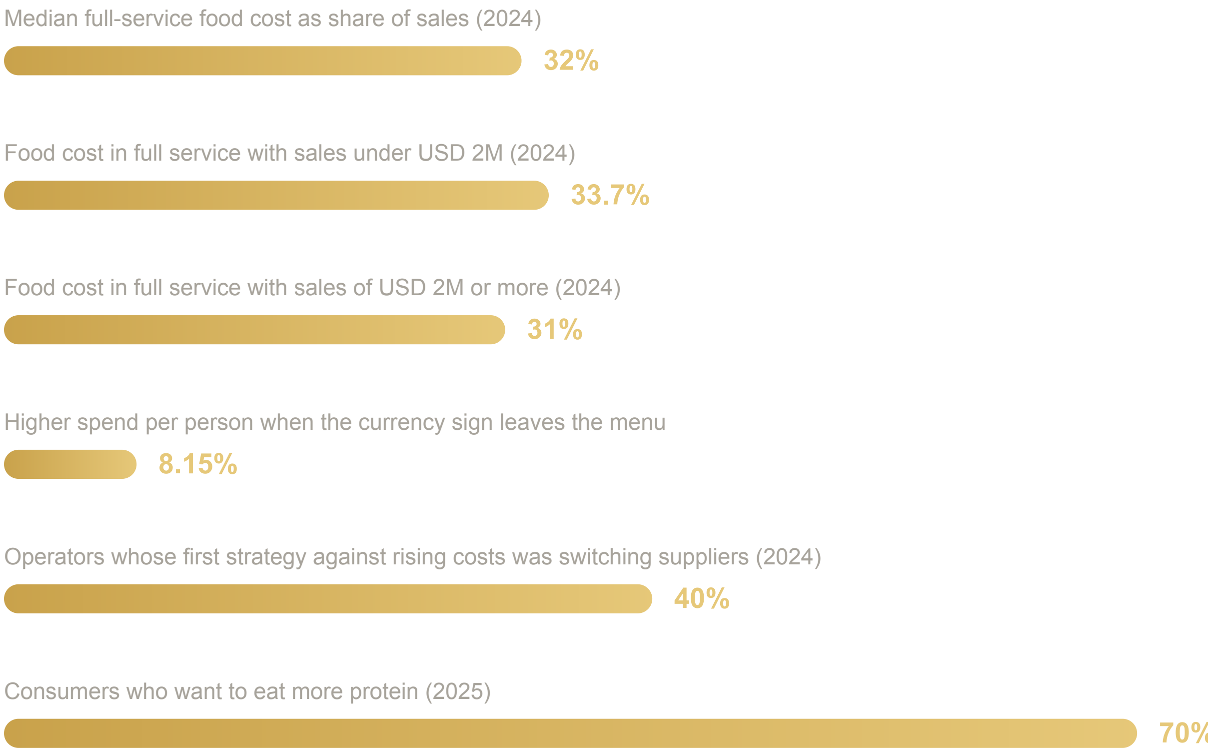
Operators whose first strategy against rising costs was switching suppliers (2024)

**70%**

Consumers who want to eat more protein (2025)

VISUALIZATION

### The numbers, visualized




Sources: National Restaurant Association 2025 · Cornell University School of Hotel Administration 2009 · TouchBistro 2024 · International Food Information Council 2025

Chart by masterestaurant.com

## REAL CASE

*“We had 46 dishes on the menu and 71% of sales concentrated in eleven of them. We costed those eleven by portion and found that two of the best sellers returned less contribution margin in currency than a pasta nobody was pushing. We reordered the printed menu, swapped the three lead photos on the Google listing and moved that pasta into the first block on Rappi. In fourteen weeks average check went from 41,800 to 47,300 pesos and food cost dropped from 35.1% to 31.6%, inside the 28-35% optimal range published by National Restaurant Association. We removed no dish on taste: we removed seven on the numbers.”*

**— Owner of a 92-seat casual restaurant applying the Masterestaurant menu engineering framework**

## HOW TO APPLY IT IN YOUR RESTAURANT

## How to position your menu in four moves

1. **Lock the standard recipe before touching a price**

   Write the standard recipe for your ten best sellers with net grammage, yield and real waste, not purchase weight. Portion costing comes from there and nowhere else. Benchmark each result against the 28-35% optimal range published by National Restaurant Association and against your format median: 32.0% in full service and 32.4% in limited service (National Restaurant Association, 2025). If your star dish runs past 40% without being fine dining —where the normal band goes from 34% to 40% per the same source— the problem sits in grammage or purchasing, and it gets solved there rather than by raising the price.

2. **Rank the menu by contribution margin in currency**

   Cross unit contribution margin with units sold over the last ninety days and you get the four quadrants of menu engineering. The mistake I see repeated most is ranking by food cost percentage: an item at 22% that barely sells contributes less cash than one at 36% that flies out. Work first on the ones that sell a lot and leave little, where a 15-gram grammage correction or a supplier change —the strategy 40% of operators chose in 2024 (TouchBistro)— shifts the month without the guest noticing anything.

3. **Split the P&L of each local digital channel**

   Your dish carries one cost in the dining room and another on Rappi, Uber Eats or DiDi, where commission, packaging and geo-targeted promotion land before margin. Calculate break-even per channel separately and decide which items climb into the top slots of each app menu, where the algorithm concentrates conversions. The figure that justifies the work: Taco Bell's digital system recorded 20% more spend per order than the human cashier (Taco Bell / Yum! Brands, 2024). Digital lifts average check when the mix is built; when it is not, it only accelerates the loss.

4. **Redesign the printed menu and keep the QR as a complement**

   Drop the currency sign and set the price at the end of the description: Cornell University, School of Hotel Administration measured an 8.15% rise in spend per person from that single change in 2009. Give the best visual position to high-margin items —pizza and dough run between 15% and 20% food cost over menu price according to Sauce (2025)— and sync those same items with the lead photos on your Google Business Profile. ALWAYS keep the printed menu: it governs service pace, narrative and suggestive selling. The QR covers delivery, accessibility, price changes and analytics. Both, each in its role.

FAQ

## Questions that arrive every week about plate profitability

### What food cost makes a dish profitable?

The sector optimal range is 28-35% per National Restaurant Association, with a 32.0% median in full service and 32.4% in limited service (2024). By concept: QSR 25-30%, casual 30-34%, fine dining 34-40%. Masterestaurant sets 32% as the MAXIMUM per dish, never as the target.

### Why is my food cost higher than the sector average?

Almost always volume, not chaos. National Restaurant Association (2025) measured 33.7% in full service under USD 2M and 31.0% from USD 2M: 2.7 points coming from purchasing power and diluted waste. Review suppliers first, the opening move for 40% of operators (TouchBistro, 2024).

### Should I rank the menu by food cost percentage or by margin in currency?

By contribution margin in currency, crossed with units sold. A dish at 36% selling 400 units contributes more cash than one at 22% selling 40. Percentage controls purchasing; the money decides which dish takes the best slot on the menu and in the app.

### Can I keep only the QR menu and drop the printed one?

No. The printed menu governs service pace, menu narrative and suggestive selling, and that is where Cornell's 2009 measurement applies: removing the currency sign lifted spend per person by 8.15%. The QR is a complement for delivery, accessibility, pricing and analytics. Both, each in its role.

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 |
|---|---|---|
| Nuevos empleos que suma la industria de restaurantes (EE. UU.) | **+200.000 empleos en 2025** | National Restaurant Association — 2025 Forecast |
| Locales de restaurantes y foodservice (EE. UU.) | **Más de 1 millón de locales** | National Restaurant Association — 2025 Forecast |
| Utilidad antes de impuestos en servicio completo (mediana) | **2,8% de las ventas en 2024** | National Restaurant Association — Restaurant Operations Report 2024/25 |
| Utilidad antes de impuestos en servicio limitado (mediana) | **4,0% de las ventas en 2024** | National Restaurant Association — Restaurant Operations Report 2024/25 |

| Metric | Benchmark 2026 | Source |
|---|---|---|
| Tráfico fuera del local en servicio completo (EE. UU.) | **30% en 2024 vs 19% en 2019** | National Restaurant Association — Off-Premises Report 2024 |
| Tráfico fuera del local en servicio limitado (EE. UU.) | **83% en 2024 vs 76% en 2019** | National Restaurant Association — Off-Premises Report 2024 |



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