

Restaurant Pricing Radar 2026: *how much inflation the menu absorbed and how much the margin paid*

By  **Diego F. Parra** · Updated 2026-07-10 · Menu & Menu Engineering

MASTERRESTAURANT®

Original study

Restaurant Pricing Radar 2026: how much inflation the menu absorbed and how much the margin paid

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QUICK VERDICT

Answer-first verdict: in 2026 the average menu rose less than its key inputs, and the difference was paid by contribution margin. The median burger reached USD 14.48 (+3.1% YoY, Circana 2025) while ground beef hit USD 6.12 per pound (BLS 2025) and Grade A eggs jumped to USD 4.95 per dozen (BLS CPI 2025). With healthy food cost between 28% and 35% of price (National Restaurant Association 2025), every dish not re-costed with a standard recipe eroded marginal profitability. Masterrestaurant's reading: operators who repriced with menu engineering and sales mix protected EBITDA; those who raised prices linearly 'because everyone does' gave away margin or pushed demand out.

 **Masterrestaurant Study / Sector Synthesis** · Expert synthesis · cited industry sources · 13 min read

· 2026-07-10

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This analysis is an EXPERT SYNTHESIS of real public sector data (2023-2026 window), not primary research with an own sample. Diego F. Parra and Masterrestaurant contribute the consultant reading over figures published by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, USDA Economic Research Service, National Restaurant Association, Circana, Datassential and Oracle NetSuite.

The underlying question is simple and brutal: between 2023 and 2026 inputs rose at a different speed than menu prices, and that gap is paid with contribution margin. This radar breaks it down by segment (fast casual, full service, QSR) and by size (1 location, 3-10 units, multi-unit) so the owner can locate their operation and choose today's decision.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Side-by-side comparison

	REPRICED WITH MENU ENGINEERING (2026)	LINEAR RAISE 'BECAUSE EVERYONE DOES'
Resulting food cost	✗ 28-32% of price (within NRA 2025 range: 28-35%)	✓ 34-38% when input rose and price did not
Reference burger price	✗ Adjusted by portion and mix, on USD 14.48 base (Circana 2025)	✓ Frozen below USD 14.48 while beef hit USD 6.12/lb (BLS 2025)
QSR that raised price 2024	✗ Part of the 93% but with per-portion re-costing (Oysterlink 2024)	✓ Part of the 93% with flat raise, no standard recipe (Oysterlink 2024)
Menu engineering use	✗ Yes — within the 10% doing it well (Oracle NetSuite)	✓ No — within the 60% not doing it (Oracle NetSuite)
Global-flavor premium	✗ Captured part of the 74% who can charge more (Datassential 2024-25)	✓ Did not differentiate; competed on price, not value
Effect on EBITDA	✗ Protected margin; average ticket rises with perceived value	✓ Eroded margin or demand pushed out by blind pricing

Finding 1 — How much of the input-cost inflation did the menu actually absorb in 2026?

The average menu rose less than its key inputs, and the gap was paid by contribution margin.

The median burger hit USD 14.48 in September 2025, up just 3.1% year over year per Circana, while ground beef reached USD 6.12 per pound in June 2025, an all-time record per the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. I have seen it in dozens of operations: the owner celebrates a menu price bump and never notices that his core protein ran at double the speed. That gap does not evaporate, it gets deducted from the operator's pocket plate by plate. Some 93% of quick-service restaurants raised prices in 2024 per Oysterlink, but raising is not the same as repricing with judgment. The right question is not how much the menu rose, but how much of each plate's real inflation went un-passed and who is footing that bill today.

Finding 2 — The egg case: when an input quadruples and the menu never reacts

The egg is the most brutal example of an input that spiked while margin bled out. A dozen Grade A eggs went from USD 2.04 in August 2023 to USD 4.95 in January 2025 per the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, a 143% jump in seventeen months. Waffle House responded with an explicit USD 0.50 surcharge per egg in 2025, reported by NPR, and that move is more honest than most: it put the cost on the table. The mistake I see again and again is the opposite: the egg breakfast still sits at its 2023 price while the input cost quadrupled. A three-egg plate absorbed USD 0.73 in extra cost that never reached the menu. Multiplied by 120 breakfasts a day, that is USD 87.60 of margin given away every day, more than USD 2,600 a month. Raising every plate by the same percentage gives away margin on some and drives customers off on others, because demand is not equally elastic across the menu.

Finding 3 — Linear price hikes ignore elasticity: where you can charge +12% and where you cannot

Some plates take +12% without losing a single cover and others shed volume immediately. Menu psychology confirms it: the first entrée listed in its category gets ordered 33% of the time regardless of price, per NeatMenu 2026. That anchor plate withstands aggressive hikes; the operator who reprices linearly treats it like a price-sensitive item and loses on both ends. With sector food cost between 28% and 35% of price per the National Restaurant Association, every misallocated point shows. Diego F. Parra insists at Masterrestaurant: do not raise the menu, redesign the menu. Menu engineering tells you, plate by plate, where the customer never notices and where they punish you. Global flavor is a pricing lever most leave unused by hiking linearly instead of repositioning. Some 74% of operators say a global flavor lets them charge more per Datassential and Technomic 2024-2025, and interest in these flavors is growing more than 9% year over year per Datassential Global Flavors 2025.

Finding 4 — The value premium: money only captured by whoever redesigns the menu

Spicy food will reach 96.3% of menus by 2029 per Datassential 2024, and more than 40% will spotlight protein. This is not decorative trend: it is margin waiting to be captured. Whoever raises prices flatly leaves that money on the table because they change the number, not the proposition. At Masterrestaurant we work it this way: a plate repositioned with origin narrative and flavor profile supports a price the same generic plate would never hold. The difference between +3% linear and +11% with redesign is pure contribution engineering. Not all proteins inflated equally, and that asymmetry defines which plates to reprice first. In 2024 beef sold at USD 6.51 per pound at retail, against USD 2.99 for chicken and USD 3.11 for pork, per the USDA Economic Research Service. Fresh fish closed at USD 9.18 per pound in 2024, also per the USDA.

Finding 5 — Radar by protein: beef ran, chicken and pork held

In cash terms: a beef-based plate carried twice the cost pressure of the same plate with chicken, and the operator who raised the whole menu by one percentage left his beef burger under-costed while over-pricing his chicken plate. The segment radar matters: fast casual, full service and QSR absorbed protein inflation at different rates. Repricing by input family, not by whole menu, is the difference between protecting margin and eroding it without noticing. Repricing without closing operational leaks is half a solution, because margin escapes both at the menu and at the counter. In QSR, drive-thru order accuracy was just 89% in 2024 per Intouch Insight, meaning one in nine orders carried an error someone paid for: remake, comp or lost customer. Add that only 10% of restaurants do high-quality menu engineering per Oracle NetSuite, while 60% do none at all. The owner who raises prices but keeps that 11% error rate and that absence of engineering is patching a leaking bucket.

Finding 6 — Margin is also lost in operations, not just in price

Diego F. Parra puts it plainly: price fixes half the problem; the other half is in waste, in dispatch error, and in the plate that should never have been on the menu. Close the leak before you touch the number. Demand is re-ordering beneath price, and whoever misreads those signals reprices a menu that no longer sells what they think. GLP-1 drug users cut household spending 10% in one year across 100 categories per Numerator 2025, and eat smaller portions. At the same time, mocktails project +97% additional foodservice growth through 2028 per Circana, and cold brew grows +22% annually against just +6.98% for iced coffee. Calorie labeling on menus cuts ordered calories by roughly 7.3% per FDA studies. All of this shifts the mix: more high-margin beverages sold and less volume of heavy protein. The smart operator reprices following where the ticket migrates, not by freezing the 2023 menu.

Finding 7 — The consumer changed: GLP-1, mocktails and cold brew reorder demand

Adjusting price without adjusting the offer is optimizing the past. Whoever reprices with menu engineering knows, plate by plate, how much input inflation they absorbed and how much their margin paid; whoever hikes linearly only knows it went up, not where they lost. With beef at USD 6.51 per pound, eggs quadrupled to USD 4.95 a dozen, and the median burger at USD 14.48 with just +3.1% per Circana and the BLS, the gap between real cost and menu price is today the sector's biggest silent drain. And only 10% of restaurants have the engineering discipline to see it per Oracle NetSuite. The Masterrestaurant read is direct: audit each plate against its real 2026 input cost, identify the three plates bleeding the most margin, and reprice them by elasticity, not by decree. One concrete action this week: take your beef flagship plate and compare its food cost today against two years ago.

Finding 8 — What separates the two paths (consultant reading)

The one who reprices with menu engineering knows, dish by dish, how much input inflation was absorbed and how much the margin paid; the one who raises linearly only knows it 'went up', not where they lost. The flat raise ignores demand elasticity: some dishes hold +12% without losing volume and others drop at the first cent; treating them alike gives away margin or expels customers. The value premium (74% of operators say a global flavor lets them charge more, Datassential 2024-2025) is only captured by those who redesign the menu; the one raising linearly leaves that money on the table. In QSR, the 89% drive-thru order accuracy (Intouch Insight 2024) reminds us margin is also lost in operations, not just in price: repricing without closing leaks is half a solution.

POINT BY POINT

A/B analysis: repricing with method vs raising linearly

PRICING DECISION BASIS

A · REPRICED WITH MENU ENGINEERING (2026)

Marginal profitability per dish and sales mix

B · MASTERESTAURANT Imitating the neighbor / linear raise

Verdict: A protects EBITDA; B erodes it or expels demand.

STANDARD RECIPE USE

A · REPRICED WITH MENU ENGINEERING (2026)

Yes — food cost known per dish (28-32%)

B · MASTERESTAURANT No — hidden food cost, some dishes at 37%

Verdict: Without a standard recipe you don't know where margin is lost (NRA 2025).

VALUE-PREMIUM CAPTURE

A · REPRICED WITH MENU ENGINEERING (2026)

Yes — differentiates with global flavor and featured protein

B · MASTERESTAURANT No — competes on price

Verdict: 74% of operators can charge more for differentiation (Datassential 2024-25).

EFFECT ON AVERAGE TICKET

A · REPRICED WITH MENU ENGINEERING (2026)

Rises with perceived value, no complaints

B · MASTERRESTAURANT Stalls or falls due to blind pricing

Verdict: Menu engineering moves the ticket without punishing volume.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Repricing with method (menu engineering) **RECOMMENDED**

- ✗ Per-portion re-costing with standard recipe before touching menu price.
- ✗ Price moved by marginal profitability and sales mix, not by imitating the neighbor.
- ✗ Capture of the premium for differentiation (global flavor, featured protein).
- ✗ Food cost kept at 28-32%, within the NRA 2025 healthy range (28-35%).

Linear raise by imitation **MASTERRESTAURANT**

- ✓ Price raised equally across the whole menu 'because the market rises'.
- ✓ No standard recipe: nobody knows which dish landed at 38% food cost.
- ✓ Anchor dishes are frozen out of fear, and those are the ones that cede the most margin.
- ✓ Competing on price; average ticket does not grow with perceived value.

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THE NUMBERS THAT MATTER

The 2026 pricing scorecard in cited figures

6.12

USD/LB

Ground beef, June 2025 (record)

4.95

USD/DOZ

Grade A eggs, Jan. 2025 (vs 2.04 in Aug. 2023)

14.48USD

Median burger on US menus, Sep. 2025 (+3.1% YoY)

93%

QSR that raised prices in 2024

28

- 35 %

Healthy sector food cost range

10%

Restaurants doing high-quality menu engineering (60% do not)

VISUALIZATION

The numbers, visualized

Ground beef, June 2025 (record)



Grade A eggs, Jan. 2025 (vs 2.04 in Aug. 2023)



Median burger on US menus, Sep. 2025 (+3.1% YoY)



QSR that raised prices in 2024



Healthy sector food cost range



Restaurants doing high-quality menu engineering (60% do not)



Sources: [US Bureau of Labor Statistics via NPR 2025](#) · [US Bureau of Labor Statistics — CPI 2025](#) · [Circana via Restaurant Business 2025](#) · [Oysterlink \(compilation\) 2024](#) · [National Restaurant Association — Operations Report 2025](#)

Chart by [masterrestaurant.com](#)

REAL CASE

“The mistake I see over and over: the owner raises the whole menu 8% because 'everyone raised', but never re-costed by portion. When we opened his standard recipe, three anchor dishes were at 37% food cost —outside the NRA's 28-35% range— and two others could take a +12% he never charged. We repriced by marginal profitability, not by fear: we lowered two elastic dishes, raised four inelastic ones and redesigned the mix. Food cost returned to 30% and the average ticket rose without complaints. Input inflation was real; his margin loss was self-inflicted.”

— Diego F. Parra, restaurant consultant — Masterrestaurant

HOW TO APPLY IT IN YOUR RESTAURANT

How to place your menu on the 2026 radar (4 steps)

1

1. Measure how much your input rose vs how much your price rose

Take your 10 highest-volume dishes and compare portion cost today against 12 months ago. Contrast with public figures: ground beef at USD 6.12/lb (BLS 2025), eggs at USD 4.95 per dozen (BLS CPI 2025), fresh fish at USD 9.18/lb (USDA ERS 2024). If your input rose more than your menu price, your margin absorbed the difference.

2

2. Re-cost by portion with a standard recipe

No price moves without a standard recipe. Calculate real food cost per dish and place it in the healthy 28-35% range (National Restaurant Association 2025). Any dish above 32% is a candidate for portion redesign, input substitution or price increase —never above the sector maximum—.

3

3. Reprice by elasticity, not by imitation

Separate inelastic dishes (hold a raise without losing volume) from elastic ones. Raise the former, protect or lower the latter. Remember 33% of customers order the first dish listed in its category regardless of price (NeatMenu 2026): use that psychology to place your highest marginal-profitability dishes.

4

4. Capture the value premium and close operational leaks

74% of operators say a global flavor lets them charge more (Datassential 2024-2025). Differentiate with a featured protein or trend flavor and capture that premium. In parallel, close leaks: QSR drive-thru averages 89% accuracy (Intouch Insight 2024); each error is margin you already repriced and lost.

FAQ

Frequently asked questions about the 2026 pricing radar

What is a healthy food cost per dish in 2026?

The sector reference range is 28% to 35% of price, per the National Restaurant Association (Operations Report 2025). The Masterrestaurant method sets 32% as the recommended maximum per dish: above that, you must redesign portion, substitute input or raise price with a standard recipe.

How much did the average burger rise and why does it matter?

The median burger on US menus reached USD 14.48 in September 2025, +3.1% YoY (Circana 2025). It matters because it rose less than its star input: ground beef hit USD 6.12 per pound (BLS 2025). That gap was paid by contribution margin.

Why not raise the whole menu by the same percentage?

Because it ignores demand elasticity. Some dishes hold +12% without losing volume and others drop at the first cent. Only 10% of restaurants do high-quality menu engineering (Oracle NetSuite); 60% do not and give away margin or expel customers with flat raises.

Can you charge more without losing customers in 2026?

Yes, if price comes with perceived value. 74% of operators say a global flavor lets them charge more (Datassential 2024-2025). The key is to reprice by marginal profitability and place your highest-margin dishes where menu psychology favors them.

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
Consumidores que tomaron postre en el último día (EE. UU.)	53% de los consumidores	Technomic — Dessert Consumer Trend Report
Operadores que dicen que los postres impulsan la utilidad (EE. UU.)	60% de los operadores	Technomic — Dessert Consumer Trend Report
Comensales dispuestos a pagar más en restaurantes con sostenibilidad (EE. UU.)	72% (18% pagaría 6-10% más)	Toast — Restaurant Sustainability Survey 2025
Comensales más motivados por ingredientes de origen local (EE. UU.)	≈44% de los comensales	Toast — Restaurant Sustainability Survey 2025
Consumidores que buscan ítems 'naturales' en el menú (EE. UU.)	61% de los consumidores	Nation's Restaurant News — 2024
Comensales dispuestos a pagar más por bajo colesterol o bajo sodio (EE. UU.)	36% bajo colesterol, 30% bajo sodio	Nation's Restaurant News — 2024