Menus, found throughout many of the Minnesota Historical Society’s collections, are a treasure trove for serious scholars and casual browsers alike. Starting before statehood in 1858, Minnesota’s restaurants, hotels, cafes, private clubs, and other emporia of eating-out made good use of the state’s printing industry, commissioning two types of menus: souvenirs of catered banquets, and what we now think of as menus—lists of foods available at a particular restaurant on a given day, usually including prices.

These often-beautiful objects hold many types of information for many types of viewers. Food historians use menus to investigate, among other things, the popularity of foods and beverages, the evolution of dining habits, and the social and cultural significance of meals. Menus offer a window into the past, revealing the tastes, fashions, and attitudes of the time. They are not just about food; they are a reflection of the society that created them.
of certain foods at certain times; what kinds of foods were served together, like trout and cucumbers; to what extent seasonal or local foods or ethnic dishes appear on banquet and restaurant menus; preparation methods (roasted, boiled, braised, fried); culinary trends, such as when mock turtle soup began to replace real turtle soup; and so on. Students of social and cultural history may discover that a closer look at menus can reveal which ethnic foods made the leap from home and church-basement kitchens to public eateries. The lists and program notes on some menus can lead to insights into how men, in particular, socialized over food at celebratory events in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Designers and others interested in the history of printing and paper will also find menus enlightening—and a lot of fun. Historic menus preserve typefaces, color combinations, and illustrations that could be adapted for use today.

Menus combine utility with beauty, humor, and/or information on organizations, buildings, or individuals. They reflect the social values of an era, such as patriotism based on connections to the early-American past. Some are nostalgic or even sentimental. Menus are good resources for business history, especially for the hospitality industry and other food-related companies, but also for food growers and sellers. Instances of all of these aspects can be seen in the menus from the 1890s to the 1930s that follow.

Often considered to be minor items—ephemera—menus are rarely saved. Although they are catalogued throughout the MNHS collections, they can be difficult to find (see below). A search on the term “menu” in the library’s online catalog yields results ranging from bills of fare from landmark hotel dining rooms (such as the Leamington’s Norse Room) and a menu from Marc’s Big Boy (in a collection of restaurant papers) to a wide array of books—published by small-town cafes, major Minnesota corporations, ethnic associations, and many entities in between—that include menus along with recipes and bits of local history. Searching the Collections Online database brings up photos of menus posted in bowling alleys or at drive-ins, menus from railroad dining cars, and souvenirs of one-time ceremonial banquets and organizational dinners. The mother lode of menus, though, can be found in the library’s pamphlet files, arranged by decade.

Beyond the state, famous American menu collections include holdings at the New York Public Library (some items have been digitized), Cornell University Library, Los Angeles Public Library, and the Johnson and Wales University menu collection, donated by the National Restaurant Association. For Minnesota menus, though, you can’t beat the Minnesota Historical Society’s library.

DEBBIE MILLER collects cookbooks and culinary ephemera. She is a reference specialist at the Minnesota Historical Society and co-author of Potluck Paradise: Favorite Fare from Church and Community Cookbooks (2008).

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Ordering from the Menu
Here’s a list of resources for sampling some excellent menu collections.

At the Minnesota Historical Society
Library catalog: www.mnhs.mnpals.net
Collections Online: www.mnhs.org/collections/ and select “Search Collections”
Pamphlet files: Items must be viewed in the History Center library. For material beginning in the 1870s, request the Collection of Minnesota Menus, TX728: Box 1, 1870–99; Box 2, 1900–19; Box 3, 1920–39, and Box 4, railroad dining-car menus, 1940–80s. Earlier menus, 1856–70, are a Reserve collection; researchers may apply for permission to see them.

Across the nation
New York Public Library digitalcollections.nypl.org/ and search “menu”
Cornell University Library rmc.library.cornell.edu/collections/menus.html
Los Angeles Public Library lapl.org/collections-resources/visual-collections/menu-collection
Johnson and Wales University menu collection, donated by the National Restaurant Association, scholarsarchive.jwu.edu/menus/
Other interesting websites include those of private collectors, such as theamericanmenu.com/
Winona’s Hot Fish Shop was a very popular eating place in southeastern Minnesota, run for decades by several generations of a local Polish American family, the Kowalewskis. This menu from 1938, not long after the restaurant moved from downtown Winona to Highway 61, displays lively graphics and, inside, considerable information about the food served during the Great Depression—at very low prices by 2014 standards. The variety of fish, greater than in most seafood restaurants today, ranges from Boneless Pike (walleye) and other freshwater species—lake trout, brook trout, Mississippi River catfish, bullheads, perch, smelt, and whitefish—to ocean fish and seafood, including salmon, halibut, cod, shrimp, oysters, and lobster. Clams, herring, crab meat, and tuna were available in soup, salad, or appetizers only.²

Those who did not want fish could order steak, hamburger steak, or sandwiches. For fish lovers with less money than the price of an entrée, there was a whitefish caviar sandwich for 25 cents or olive oil sardines on toast for 20 cents. Drinks included draft and bottled beer, coffee, milk, tea, hot chocolate, and buttermilk. Sodas apparently were not ubiquitous in 1930s Minnesota.

The Kowalewskis also ran a fish market and catered parties on the restaurant’s lower level. As an extra incentive to dine out during hard times, the Hot Fish Shop retained an attendant who would check your car’s gas and oil while you ate.

Three menus from the early 1900s document St. Paul’s popular Como Park Pavilion Restaurant and Ice Cream Parlor. This one from 1906 lists the operator as Jacob Barnet, lessee. The menu offered many different types of food to attract Como’s many different types of visitors and also advertised the park’s “Do Not Fail to See” attractions. Barnet bragged that he and his staff made their own popcorn, brittle, taffy, and “fairy floss cotton candy,” none of which appear on the menu, implying a separate counter for take-away foods. For beverages, “Table Waters” included restaurant-made root beer, Malted Grape Juice (Malto-Grapo), lemonade, phosphate, ginger ale—domestic and imported—and many other intriguing drinks.³
Department stores like St. Paul’s Golden Rule, “the store that lives up to its name,” offered customers full meals and light refreshments. This 1919 menu lists a great variety of choices, from relishes and soups to roasts, sandwiches, desserts, and beverages. Some of the homey dishes of the era include Bowl of Half and Half [with] Crackers or Bread and Bowl of Rice with Half and Half and 15 Graham Crackers. The water came from “our own artesian wells,” and all the baked goods were from the store’s own bakery. The other side of the menu offers soda fountain treats: ice cream sodas, plain sundaes, and fancy sundaes, increasingly popular under Prohibition, like the Havana Cream Puff, the Chop Suey, and the Roman Beauty; egg drinks, lemonades, grape juice, and sodas; and punches, freezes, frappes, and parfaits. The handwriting at bottom reads: “These prices are remarkable—about half the price at other restaurants.”

In 1929 the On Leong Chinese Merchants’ Association of America held its twenty-fifth annual convention banquet at the New Nicollet Hotel in Minneapolis, announced on one of the most elegant invitations and matching menus in the collection. (Setting type on brocade paper must have been a challenge for the printer.) The banquet served an expensive array of dishes, from Baked Lobster Thermidor to Mignon of Tenderloin Heart with Béarnaise Sauce and Breast of Long Island Duck. Perhaps to please the hoped-for guests—leading Twin Cities businessmen—no Chinese food was served. Revealing as that choice may be, it was disappointing to this researcher. The menu also lists the organization’s national officers and the event’s toastmaster: the executive secretary of the Minneapolis Civic and Commerce Association.
Northwestern Miller, the important trade paper for the flour millers of Minneapolis and the Upper Midwest, celebrated 50 years of publication with a banquet at the Minneapolis Athletic Club in 1923. The elegant menu’s cover emphasizes wheat—the industry’s backbone—and an elaborate insignia (“Forward, Always Forward; Circulates Around the World”). Given the flour millers’ strong connection to the region where the wheat grew and the waterfall powered the mills, it’s not surprising that the menu emphasizes local foods, especially Wisconsin brook trout, roast Minnesota guinea hen, and Indian wild rice.
While businessmen and civic leaders were often feted, several twentieth-century menus show that businesses also celebrated their male workers. The menu for the Veterans Association of the Great Northern Railway’s 1916 annual meeting in St. Paul includes an unusual announcement: President Louis W. Hill’s letter notifying employees that the GN had instituted a pension plan. “The Company hopes that this voluntary establishment . . . will confirm to them this Company’s appreciation of faithful service, and its interest in their welfare.” The program features beautiful color photos of scenes in Glacier National Park, where the 1917 meeting was scheduled to take place. The menu offers entrées of lake trout and fried chicken.
The Mankato House, which opened in 1855 (three years after the city was founded), announced its Dinner Bill of Fare for a Saturday in March 1890 on a card on the back of which, it appears, diners placed their orders. No prices are listed; perhaps the menu was standard and the charges fluctuated. The restaurant offered items seen on other Minnesota menus of the era, among them roasted beef, pork loin, and chicken with dressing. But there were unique dishes, too, such as corned beef with turnips. Entrées included some puzzlers: hot Boston brown bread as a stand-alone? Bell fritters with wine sauce? Cold offerings ranged from roast beef to ox tongue, while vegetables included “sour krout” and marrow fat squash. Among the desserts was Corn Starch Blanc-Mange, and tea drinkers could choose black or green.

Agriculture is also represented among the banquet menus. The modestly printed program for the Minnesota Holstein Breeders Association Banquet, held at Alexandria’s Hotel Blake in an unspecified year, features a distinctive logo: a Holstein standing on the state of Minnesota. The menu was modest, too: baked ham, potatoes, peas, rolls, and salad, but the coffee served with dessert came with Holstein cream. The program, arranged by the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce and the Douglas County Holstein Breeders Association, included music, songs, dancing, impersonations, presentation of trophies, and an address by the publisher of the Minneapolis Tribune. The event ended with banqueters singing two songs honoring the cow; the words were printed on the back of the menu. To the tune of “Hail, Hail, the Gang’s All Here”: Hail! Hail! The Holstein cow/She’s a thing of beauty/Always does her duty/Hail! Hail! The Holstein cow/She’s the dairy cow for me.
A number of menus in the collection shed light on immigration and ethnicity. In 1920, when Americanization of immigrants was in full swing throughout Minnesota, South St. Paul’s Central School held an Americanization Dinner to benefit its playground fund. The menu, carefully printed on rough paper by the high-school printing class, offered a fairly standard choice of meats, fish, and salads along with homemade desserts. But there were also Specialties, which must have been a great draw, much like the exotic offerings at the Festival of Nations that began a few years later. Spelling wasn’t always perfect, but the point was made: delicacies of foreign countries can be delicious.

Patriotic organizations were important outlets for male community service and socializing in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The Minnesota Society of the Sons of the Revolution celebrated Washington’s Birthday on February 22, 1919, at St. Paul’s Minnesota Club with a dinner ranging from grapefruit and oysters through relishes, soup, fish or chicken, cucumber sandwiches, potatoes, and salad to ice cream, cake, and coffee. Among the records of this gathering is the card of Minnesota Historical Society director (later, archivist of the United States) Dr. Solon J. Buck, along with a program of music, toasts, an address, and patriotic songs. The menu is full of information, listing each Son and, where applicable, his military and/or civil service, including American Protective League, American Red Cross, Minnesota National Guard, and other groups.
Menus honoring individuals are also part of the collection. Some celebrate famous people, such as James J. Hill, while others honor lesser-known dignitaries. D. D. Merrill Co., St. Paul, printed this elegant, multi-page souvenir of a dinner given for Hill by the citizens of St. Paul at the Hotel Aberdeen, June 9, 1893. Bound with gold braid between hard covers, its front is festooned with the raised, metallic initials JJH. Inside, the names of program speakers are printed in a formal script often found on wedding invitations of the era and later. The food was sumptuous, too, with seasonal touches. It was June, a month without an R, so no oysters were served. Little neck clams took their place. Clear Green Turtle [soup] was followed by fish and entrée courses, each with appropriate wine pairing. The familiar tenderloin of beef was offered—with cauliflower this time—but broiled mushrooms were nearby. Along with the dessert ices and cheeses, strawberries marked the month of June. Former Gov. William R. Merriam introduced Hill, and tributes came from men representing the railroads and the World’s Columbian Exposition, ongoing in Chicago. Archbishop John Ireland spoke about The Successful Man. The banquet was part of a larger celebration that featured a parade, street decorations, and reception. Included in the MNHS copy of the menu was the seating card for Alexander Ramsey, the first governor of Minnesota Territory.
Sometimes, menus from dinners given for less prominent people, like the one newspaperman Herschel V. Jones threw for author, critic, and professor of literature James Gray at the Minneapolis Club in late 1913, display real creative flair. Constructed to stand up and sharply illustrated by Frank Wing, the piece’s menu offerings were overshadowed by the clever drawings. Wing, who worked for Minneapolis’s Art Instruction Inc., was known for his sketches of prominent men, published in local newspapers. The bill of fare was worth a look, though: beginning with caviar canapé, the meal ended with Biscuit Tortoni, a rich, custardy ice-cream confection, Camembert, and coffee. Like some other menus in the collection, this one bears the autographs of several attendees.
A favorite menu documents the Good-Bye Dinner in Nine Languages given for F. S. Verbeck, manager of the Minnesota Type Foundry, at St. Paul’s Windsor Hotel in 1891. Verbeck was moving to Chicago, but not before his publisher and editor friends from all over the state gave him a grand send-off and a menu with fonts and languages galore—Hebrew, Latin, Swedish, Norwegian, French, Italian, German, and Spanish, as well as English.

Oysters, consommé, salmon, sweetbreads, roast duck, and chicken salad preceded the ice cream, fruit, cheese, cakes, coffee, and cigars.

People remembering their early arrival in the state or territory, such as the Territorial Pioneers of Minnesota, or recalling places they had left, such as Norway or Vermont, met regularly for festive dinners now recalled by menus. In 1902, for example, the Vermont Association of Minnesota gathered for its twelfth annual banquet and reunion at Minneapolis’s Hotel Nicollet. The menu listed the Vermonters’ officers and executive committee members, most of whom lived in Minneapolis. Its dishes harked back to the geography of New England: Green Mountain Oysters on Shell; Cream of Tomato, New England; Filet of Halibut au Lake Champlain; Southdown Lamb Chops, Vermont Style; Sorbet Montpelier; and Plymouth Rock Chicken Salad. The drinks were mocha and Vermont sweet cider. Adding to the nostalgia, the words to Auld Lang Syne were printed opposite the food list.
At one time, hotels celebrated their formal opening with a banquet. When the Hotel Radisson opened its doors in Minneapolis in 1909, its souvenir program included the menu of a dinner held on December 15. Befitting Pierre Esprit Radisson, the explorer whose name the hotel chose, the menu was all in French: Canapé, Caviar Russe, followed by Huitres (oysters), Consommé, Homard Farci (stuffed lobster), Ris de Veau Braisé (sweetbreads), Sorbet Radisson, and Poussin de Bruyère roti (roasted spring chicken) and concluding with Salade Moderne, Beignets Singapore, Glaces Fantaisie (fantasy ices), and petit fours. The souvenir’s cover proudly depicts the new hotel and the historic explorer with his guides. Inside is a brief account of his adventures.
To conclude this sampling of Minnesota menus, we return to the 1920s and 1930s to see some beautiful examples of graphic art. The inside of this lovely menu welcomes the reader to the twenty-sixth annual convention banquet of the National Association of Retail Grocers in the United States, held June 25–28, 1923, in St. Paul. The next page lists officers of the national association and its St. Paul and other branches. The banquet was modest: fruit cocktail and relishes, chicken, sweet potatoes, rolls, peas, lettuce-and-asparagus-tips salad, and ice cream with strawberry sauce. The program was more varied than many, with assorted musical performances followed by addresses from St. Paul’s mayor, Gov. J. A. O. Preus, and officials of the grocers association. These were followed by “Community Singing” and a regular vaudeville show: operatic baritone, several dancers, comedian, singer, magician, and an Irish comedian.
This menu from St. Paul’s Hotel Lowry coffee shop provides interesting evidence of the foods such Twin Cities eateries offered during the Great Depression. On September 10, 1936, complete dinners cost less than $1.00 (prime rib was 85 cents—equivalent to $14.55 in 2014) and Today’s Specials were a T-Bone Steak with potatoes, lettuce salad, rolls, and beverage ($1.00) or a Cold Assorted Dutch Plate with Swiss cheese, potato salad, spiced new beets, rolls, and apple pie with cheese, plus beverage (75 cents). The Paul Bunyan Sandwich (loaf of bread, Swiss cheese, liver sausage) cost 25 cents; fresh shrimp cocktail was 35 cents, and Whole Split Wall Eye Pike Saute Meuniere, with American fried potatoes, bread, and butter was 60 cents. Prices were low, but the menu’s cover design looks to the future with its modern, sans serif type and stylish sprig of leaves and berries.

Notes

A big thank you to Lydia Lucas for arranging and cataloging the menus in the pamphlet files and to the helpful research staff at the Blue Earth, Douglas, and Winona county historical societies.

1. Moira F. Harris and Leo J. Harris, Minnesota on Paper: Collecting our Printed History (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). When menus are saved, the best collections are broad ones, from which the range of possibilities and patterns can emerge.


3. For more on the increasing popularity of ice cream treats during Prohibition, which began in 1919, see Rae Katherine Eighmey, Soda Shop Salvation: Recipes and Stories from the Sweeter Side of Prohibition (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2013).


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