

The Menu Innovation Test Hidden Inside "A Modest Proposal"

A proposal can sound cheap, easy, and profitable while quietly turning people into inventory.

The most dangerous menu business case is not the one with bad arithmetic.

It is the one with excellent arithmetic applied to the wrong thing.

Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* offers a useful warning for anyone responsible for menu innovation. Its speaker presents an outrageous solution to poverty as if it were a disciplined operating plan: define the population, estimate supply, assign weights, calculate yield, identify buyers, allocate inventory, and forecast national economic benefit.

The mechanics are deliberately precise. The premise is morally indefensible.

That distinction matters in menu strategy because a concept can pass an initial commercial screen while failing the larger test of whether customers, employees, operators, and the public will accept what the numbers imply.

A practical review framework:

1. Separate unit economics from human meaning.

Swift's proposal converts children into food, clothing, labor relief, and profit. It even claims benefits for mothers, landlords, taverns, wealthy diners, and the broader economy. The lesson is not that economics are irrelevant. It is that a favorable contribution margin cannot redeem a proposition that customers experience as exploitative, grotesque, or dehumanizing.

Ask: *What does this product mean when described plainly, outside the spreadsheet?*

2. Treat precision as a claim, not proof.

The speaker uses population estimates, weights, market demand, seasonal timing, and revenue projections to create authority. He also claims years of study and dismisses earlier calculations as faulty.

For a new menu item, detailed assumptions about supply, yield, waste, labor, and demand are necessary. But precision can create false confidence. Every key number should be paired with its source, confidence level, and operational dependency.

3. Map the full operating system-and the full blast radius.

Swift does not stop at the product. He imagines sellers, buyers, preparation sites, household use, public feasts, and secondary products made from the skins. That completeness makes the satire more disturbing: the proposal is not merely an idea; it is a scalable system.

Use the same discipline before launch:

- Who supplies it?
- Who prepares it, and with what added complexity?
- What happens when demand, availability, or quality varies?
- Which customer groups could interpret the offer negatively?
- What would employees, franchisees, or the public repeat about it?

4. Audit the alternatives before declaring the concept necessary.

The speaker rejects ordinary reforms-reducing luxury, improving trade, showing mercy to tenants, and ending exploitative practices-only after admitting that leaders lack the will to implement them.

That is the non-obvious lesson: a "breakthrough" product may be filling a gap created by institutional unwillingness, not genuine absence of better options.

Before approving a highly engineered concept, document the simpler alternatives and why they fail.

The best menu innovation is not merely cheap, differentiated, and executable. It creates value without requiring the business to ignore what the product says about its customers, suppliers, workers, or communities.

If the business case depends on counting transactions while hiding the human consequence, the problem is not the forecast. It is the premise.