DISH DIRECTORY — GUIDE

# Reading a menu price range

*Dollar-sign price ranges summarize what a meal costs, but each guide defines them differently. Learn what the signs mean and what they leave out.*

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Most directories mark restaurants with dollar signs from $ to $$$$. The signs give a quick sense of cost, but they hide as much as they show. No single rule defines them. Each guide sets its own bands, and a $$ dinner in one city can cost more than a $$$ dinner in another.

## What the signs usually mean

The signs rank restaurants against each other rather than against fixed prices. As a rough guide:

- $ means a cheap meal: counter service, food trucks and casual spots.
- $$ means a mid-range meal: a standard sit-down restaurant.
- $$$ means an expensive meal: polished service and higher-cost ingredients.
- $$$$ means a luxury meal: tasting menus and fine dining.

These bands shift with the city. Rent and wages set menu prices, so a $$$$ room in a small city can cost less than a $$$ room in New York or San Francisco. Compare signs only within one city. This directory lists restaurants by city, which makes that comparison fair.

## What the signs leave out

A price sign usually reflects the cost of food for one person, often anchored on a main course. It rarely includes drinks, and drinks move the total more than anything else. A round of cocktails can cost more than an entree. Wine by the glass at a fine-dining room can match the price of a whole dinner at a casual spot.

Tax and tip also sit outside the sign. In the United States, sales tax and a standard tip add roughly a quarter to a third on top of menu prices. In Canada, goods and services tax plus a provincial tax and tip do the same. A $$ menu can therefore produce a $$$ check once drinks, tax and tip land.

Set menus and supplements break the scale too. Some tasting-menu rooms quote one fixed price that covers the whole dinner. Others quote a base price and charge extra for pairings, supplements and service. Read the fine print on the menu page before you judge the value.

## How to estimate your own total

Start with the average entree price when a listing shows one. Add a starter or dessert if you usually order one. Then add your drinks: count each glass at menu price rather than guessing. Finally add tax and the tip you plan to leave. That sum is your real per-person cost.

For a group, multiply the per-person figure by the headcount and add a margin for shared

plates. Groups order more starters and desserts than the sum of individual habits suggests. A ten percent margin covers most surprises.

## Signs are a starting point

Use the dollar signs to sort a long list into cheap, mid-range and expensive. Then open the menu of each finalist and price your own meal. Two restaurants with the same sign can still differ by the cost of a cocktail. The menu, not the sign, sets your budget.

## Frequently asked questions

**What does $$ mean on a restaurant listing?**

It usually means mid-range prices, roughly the cost of a casual sit-down meal. The exact range differs between guides, so check one menu before you book.

**Why did my check exceed the listed price range?**

Price ranges usually cover food only. Drinks, tax and tip sit outside the range and can add half as much again.