THE WOKS OF LIFE

A CULINARY GENEALOGY

Heuristic Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

The Woks of Life is a recipe blog that consists of Chinese and Chinese-American recipes and relevant articles. Four usability evaluators were given a scope and tasks to perform on The Woks of Life website. From there, they conducted a heuristic evaluation, referencing Nielsen's ten usability heuristics to record problems that violate the heuristics. Based on the frequency, impact, and persistence of the problems, the evaluators then assigned the problems a severity rating, which helped guide the team in determining the priority of the issues. A total of nine usability problems were found by the evaluators.

After analyzing and prioritizing the problems that the evaluators found, we have come up with three recommendations to improve the usability and overall user experience of the website:

Recommendation #1: Add a navigation item to the top-level navigation bar that links to the cookbook page

Recommendation #2: Add search functionality to the ingredients glossary page and consolidate the categories

Recommendation #3: Add a textbox and input steppers to change the serving amount

For each recommendation, the problem was described and a solution was made, with a mock-up attached to show what it would look like on the site. The implementation of these recommendations on The Woks of Life website would allow for greater discoverability, as well as a better navigational and interactive experience.

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TRUSTED RECIPES *from "the bible of chinese home cooking"*

QUICK & EASY

MOST POPULAR

VEGETABLES

NOODLES

Introduction

The Woks of Life is a recipe blog website that consists of 1600+ Chinese and Chinese-American recipes and related articles. Nicknamed "The Bible of Chinese Home Cooking" by Bon Appetit, the website offers multiple ways for a user to navigate through their extensive recipe collection, such as through filtering based on ingredients, course, occasion, or dietary restrictions. It even includes companion articles on topics like cooking techniques, gardening tutorials, and culture.

Exposure to users of Chinese cooking and culture is an important mission of this website, and it completes this through thoughtful information architecture, an abundance of vivid and mouthwatering images, and friendly design. However, there are some usability issues that may hinder a user in navigating the site and appreciating its features. This report will use the heuristic evaluation method to discover those issues, analyze the results, and construct recommendations to improve the website's interface and overall user experience.

Methodology

This report's research is based on heuristic evaluation. A **heuristic evaluation** is a method used to find design problems in a user interface, where evaluators judge the interface against a set of guidelines called **heuristics** (Moran & Gordon, 2023). This method is effective due to its ability to be carried out through even early stages of the design process, completed quickly, and flexible in being carried out against a variety of interfaces with a variety of heuristics.

A heuristic evaluation can be conducted with any set of heuristics. For this report, **Nielsen's ten usability heuristics** were referred to by the evaluators to judge a problem. They are based on an understanding of human behavior, psychology, and information processing and consist of the following principles (Nielsen, 1994a) :

H1. Visibility of system status

H2. Match between the system and the real world

H3. User control and freedom

H4. Consistency and standards

H5. Error prevention

H6. Recognition rather than recall

H7. Flexibility and efficiency of use

H8. Aesthetic and minimalist design

H9. Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors

H10. Help and documentation

In addition to identifying the heuristic(s) that a usability problem may violate, the evaluators were also responsible for assigning a severity rating to the problem. The **severity** of a problem is a combination of three factors: the frequency of which the problem occurs, the impact of the problem if it occurs, and the persistence of the problem. The **severity rating** allows for the prioritization of potential fixes and is based on a scale, number 0 to 4 (Nielsen, 1994b):

0 = I don't agree that this is a usability problem at all

1 = Cosmetic problem only

2 = Minor usability problem

3 = Major usability problem

4 = Usability catastrophe

Procedure

1. Four usability evaluators are selected and asked to perform a heuristic evaluation on the website, thewoksoflife.com, on their personal devices.
2. The evaluators are given their scope and tasks, as detailed in the following section.
3. The evaluators perform each task and identify usability issues based on Nielsen's heuristics.
4. The evaluators record the issues encountered in a provided document, listing a description of the issue, the heuristic(s) violated, and the severity rating.
5. The lead evaluator compiles and analyzes the issues recorded.
6. The lead evaluator formulates recommendations based on the issues and analysis.

Scope and Tasks

You have a potluck coming up next month. You're a big fan of Asian food so you decide to check out some recipes for inspiration on this website.

1. You want to see what are the ingredients and steps needed to make 10 servings of Mapo Tofu, making sure to check the nutritional information (specifically the total carbohydrates, you're watching your sugar intake).
2. You love all the recipes and want to see how to buy a signed copy of "The Woks of Life Cookbook."
3. You have some "sweet potato starch noodles", and you want to find some information on them and some recipes on where you can use them.

Results

Key findings

The Woks of Life's detailed information architecture and highly visual design entices users to discover new recipes and relive old ones. However, a review of the website shows there can be improvements made. There were a total of **nine usability problems** found by the evaluators. Between all nine usability problems, it was found that all ten of Nielsen's heuristics were violated. However, the severity differs between each problem, with one receiving a severity rating of 1, four receiving a rating of 3, and the rest receiving a rating of 2. Some of the problems detailed minor issues in visual appearance, while others were more significant and related to issues in navigation and search. For this report, we will go over **three recommendations** to address the most severe problems, which will hopefully alleviate the more minor problems consequentially.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Add a navigation item to the top-level navigation bar that links to the cookbook page

The problem: Although the website succeeds in carefully organizing its recipes and articles, the access points to purchasing the cookbook seem to have been placed with less intention. From the home page, the user is able to access the cookbook page in two ways: from the top-level navigation bar under the "Recipes" dropdown, and directly from the home page where a small tile is dedicated to the cookbook. The second access point seems like it should be easy to spot – however, it either gets covered by an ad (as shown in Figure 1), or it gets mistaken as an ad, due to the unpredictable placement of ads throughout the site. The first access point is more indirect, as it requires the user to know that the book would be found in the recipes section (as shown in Figure 2). Thus, the cookbook page is not easy to discover or navigate to.
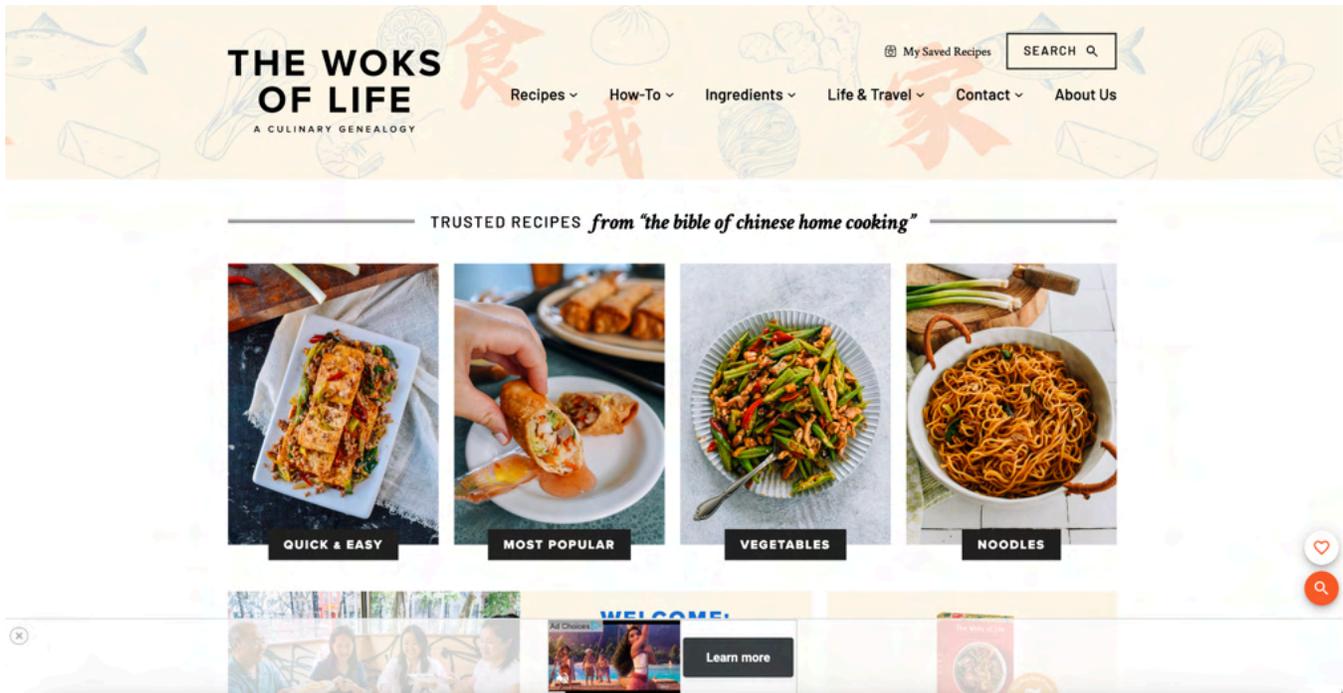
Figure 1: The cookbook tile is underneath the ad banner at the bottom of the home page.

Figure 2: The navigation item for the cookbook is underneath the "Recipes" dropdown

The solution: We've suggested for a link to the cookbook page to be placed on the navigation bar, labelled with "Buy Our Cookbook," as shown in Figure 3. As the cookbook is mentioned several times throughout the website, it seems like it is important enough to put it as its own separate navigation item, visible on all pages of the website at all times. This makes it easier for users to discover that The Woks of Life has a cookbook, and it makes it easier for them to navigate to the page to find out more about it and how to buy it.

Figure 3: The proposed solution, a 'Buy Our Cookbook' link on the navigation bar, underlined on hover

Recommendation #2: Add search functionality to the ingredients glossary page and consolidate the categories

The problem: Ingredients are an important part of cooking, and The Woks of Life highlights that through its dedicated section to Chinese ingredients. However, the global search functionality seems to favor recipes over ingredients, making it difficult to search on the website for descriptions of ingredients or by specific ingredients. The organization of the ingredients section of the website is also hard to navigate, as it forces the user to go to the ingredient category page (as shown in Figure 4) and scroll through a long list of ingredients to find the specific one. So, the user has to have knowledge of what category their ingredient belongs to, and they have to spend time manually searching for it.

Figure 4: The Chinese ingredients dropdown options

The solution: To prevent scrolling and nonspecific search results, we've suggested that a search bar is implemented on the "Chinese Ingredients Glossary" page, as shown in Figure 5. The results would reduce the need to scroll on the page, and it would only be for ingredients, filtering out irrelevant recipes and articles. For the search functionality to work, it would be best to consolidate all the ingredients and categories into one page, which would also eliminate the issue of lacking prior knowledge to what category an ingredient belongs to.

Figure 5: The proposed solution, a search bar and consolidated list of ingredients

Recommendation #3: Add a textbox and input steppers to change the serving amount

The problem: The serving slider on the recipe portion of a recipes page (shown in Figure 6) leads to difficult and imprecise interactions. It is sensitive, making it hard for the user to get to the exact number that they need to. The popover that the slider is attached to also moves when the number is changed, making the interaction even more difficult.
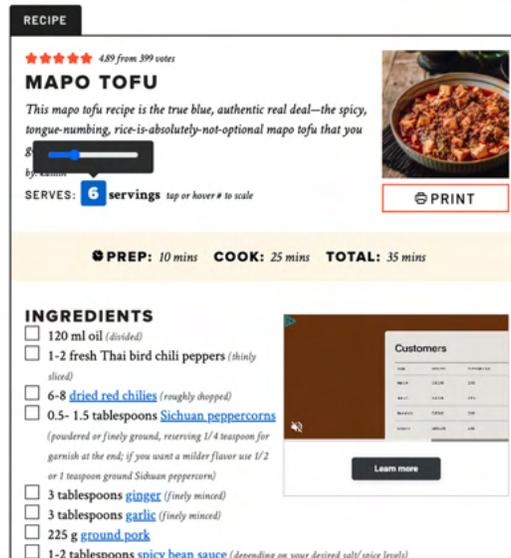
Figure 6: The servings slider popover in a recipe

The solution: We've proposed that the slider popover is replaced with a textbox and input steppers combination, as shown in Figure 7. The input steppers would allow the user to increment or decrement the servings by 1 on a click, and the textbox would allow the user to simply type in the amount without having to use the input steppers. Although the textbox could be fine on its own, we've added the input steppers to act as signifiers that the servings amount can be manipulated, as well as a way for the user to not have to use the keyboard on a mobile device. This update would allow the user greater control over the input.
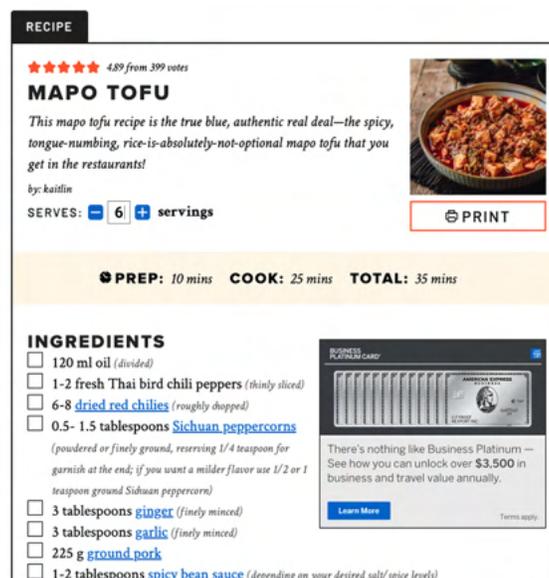

Figure 7: The proposed solution, a textbox and input steppers

Conclusion

The Woks of Life functions well as a recipe blog, as shown by its success and nickname as "the Bible of Chinese Home Cooking." However, there are still improvements to be made to the overall experience on the user interface. Using Nielsen's ten usability heuristics, our team of usability evaluators were able to discover usability issues and come up with three recommendations. First, add a navigation item to the top-level navigation bar that links to the cookbook page. Second, add search functionality to the ingredients glossary page and consolidate the categories. Third, add a textbox and input steppers to change the serving amount. By implementing these recommendations, the discoverability of the website will improve, as well as the navigation and overall user experience.

Appendix

The full list of usability issues found by the four evaluators, the heuristics they violated, and the severity rating

Issues	Heuristic(s) violated	#1	#2	#3	#4	Rating
Ad placement is distracting and misleading throughout all the pages.	4, 5, 8	3	2	2	2	3
Search bar coming up from bottom of the page is unexpected	4, 7, 8	2	1			1
Serving scale feature is difficult to understand and use.	3, 4, 5, 7	2	2		2	3
Nutritional info isn't labeled with serving amount	10	3				2
"Jump to Recipes" button lacks contrast and is difficult to see	1, 6			2		2
It's difficult to find out how to buy a cookbook on the website. There are multiple entry points, but they are either assumed to be ads or not in an obvious spot on the navigation bar. In the article to buy the book, you have to scroll down to get to the option to buy.	1, 2, 4, 6, 7	1	1	3	4	3
You have to be taken to another website to buy the book.	3, 5, 7		2	4		2
You have to scroll down to the ingredient in order to get to it on the ingredients page.	3, 7, 9	2	2			2
Searching by ingredient is difficult. You have to type it in exactly, and even then it doesn't directly show the article that highlights noodles.	2, 3, 4, 6, 7	2	2	3		3

References

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