

Parents want healthful options on kids' menus while kids want flavor and fun; grilled chicken skewers and avocado dip hit both marks.



OFF

with the

Kid Gloves

Children's menus are ripe for reinvention with grown-up flavors and appealing, healthful options

BY DR. A. ELIZABETH SLOAN

Little kids are big business in the foodservice sector. Children under the age of 13 accounted for nearly 8 billion restaurant visits and nearly \$40 billion in sales for the year ending July 2007, according to the NPD Group. Nearly 80 percent of those visits and 64 percent of the dollars went to quick-service restaurants (QSRs). However, today's dual-income parents are taking their children out to eat more often than previous generations. Increasingly, they are choosing full-service casual and often upscale eateries, a pattern which may well represent an even bigger opportunity.

While "family" restaurant traffic, or "parties with children," fell 2 percent for the quarter ending December 2007, according to NPD/CREST, the cutbacks are not just about the economy. A lack of healthy menu options for all ages is also curbing consumers' fast-food visits, notes Technomic's March 2008 American Express Market Brief.

Two out of three shoppers say the food they eat at home is healthier than menu offerings, finds the Food Marketing Institute's (FMI's) 2008 Shopping for Health survey. Yet, despite the increased interest in healthy menu offerings, fried remains the top preparation method on the children's menu, according to Mintel Menu Insights.

NOT ENOUGH MENU NEWS

One in five diners has cut back on fast-food visits because of menu boredom, saying menu items no longer appeal to them. The decades-old formula of filling, consistent and affordable foods is showing signs of staleness. Mintel Menu Insights research shows that chicken fingers, macaroni and cheese, grilled-cheese sandwiches, burgers and pizza are still the top five items on children's menus (*Figure 1*), but without a flavor upgrade, they're going to grow old quickly.

QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ The gap between what youngsters really eat and what kids' menus have to offer
- ▶ What parents are looking for when the whole family dines out
- ▶ Portion size options, healthful preps, sophisticated flavors and other strategies for tailoring menus to the kid market

SONIC



FIGURE 1

CHICKEN & CHEESE LEAD LIST

Top children's menu items

1. Chicken fingers
2. Grilled cheese
3. Macaroni and cheese
4. Hamburger
5. Cheeseburger
6. Hot dog
7. Pizza – cheese
8. Corn dog
9. Pizza
10. Spaghetti
11. Sandwich — peanut butter and jelly
12. Quesadilla — cheese
13. Chicken nuggets
14. Ribs
15. Breakfast — pancakes

SOURCE: MINTEL MENU INSIGHTS, 2008



Kids who eat ethnic standards like quesadillas at home and at school are ready for authentic global foods when dining out.

MOE'S SOUTHWEST GRILL

Kids' palates today are more sophisticated than those of previous generations, and menu designers need to keep pace.

NPD reports that among diners aged 13 and under, servings of fries were flat for the year ending July 2007; pizza and nuggets were up slightly, while burgers and frozen sweets each fell 4 percent. Servings of tried-and-true favorites such as hot dogs, macaroni and cheese and pasta also declined; fried chicken grew a mere 1 percent. The items gaining in popularity with the under-13 set included chicken sandwiches, breakfast sandwiches, Mexican, seafood, cookies and fruit.

HOME-COOKING CUES

The 2007 Gallup Study of Dinner reports that nearly eight in 10 households with children under age 10 say "serving foods my family likes" is very important in making restaurant choices. However, discrepancies appear between top items on children's menus (Figure 1) and what they eat for dinner (Figure 2). In a typical week, baked, roasted or grilled chicken, steak or roast beef, pasta (beyond mac-and-cheese), pork, fish and eggs are all eaten by more than one-quarter of households with kids. Yet Mintel's research shows none of these dishes on menus.

The Gallup study found that 96 percent of meal preparers in households with kids regularly serve ethnic foods, with Italian,

Mexican and Asian topping the list (Figure 3). Families average at least one take-out or delivered dinner per week, so kids are being exposed to new flavors at an unprecedented rate.

Virtually all schools now serve tacos, burritos and quesadillas, according to NPD; two-thirds offer stir-fry, sushi and egg rolls. Spanikopitas, kabobs, hummus dip, calamari, falafel, tabouli, curry and jasmine rice are other common school-menu offerings.

TIME TO GROW UP

It's time to upgrade the kids' menu. And it will pay off. Mintel Menu Insights reports that Friendly's upgraded children's menu resulted in a 9.1 percent increase in sales. When Shari's introduced a kid-focused initiative and health-sized its kids' offerings, the company enjoyed a 200 percent increase in add-on sales and a 13 percent jump in kids' menu sales.

Technomic's 2008 Understanding Kids' Menus Report found that between 86 and 90 percent of families with kids under 12 feel it is important for restaurants to offer a kids' menu. But other evidence shows it's time for the basic kids' menu to evolve. With children's palates now becoming more adult-like earlier and with larger portions becoming more important for older children, one-size-fits-all menus no longer make sense for diners beyond age 8.

FIGURE 2

WHAT'S FOR DINNER

A rundown of what families are eating at home:

1. Chicken/Turkey
2. Hamburgers
3. Pizza
4. Pasta
5. Steak/Roast beef
- (TIE) 6. Mexican food
- (TIE) 6. Hot dogs
7. Pork
8. Fish
- (TIE) 9. Eggs
- (TIE) 9. Fried chicken
10. Sandwiches

SOURCE: MULTI-SPONSOR SURVEYS INC. THE 2007 GALLUP STUDY OF DINNER

FIVE STRATEGIES to Invigorate Kids' Menus

BY STEPHEN GOLDMANN

It's easy to get caught in the trap of dumbing down food offerings to appease children. The thinking goes: If chicken fingers will get them to eat, then bring on the crispy chicken. But keep in mind that the population under 11 years of age is projected to grow by more than 14 percent by 2015, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, so competition for dollars spent on kids' food is increasing. To capture more of this market, you'll need to be as innovative with the kids' menu as you are with your regular menu. Here are five strategies to consider when targeting family dining:

1 GROWN-UP PALATES. As children are exposed to more sophisticated flavors, adult flavors and forms are trickling down to the children's menu. What signature item of yours can be adapted in a smaller portion or a more toned-down way? Boston-based Legal Sea Foods consistently tops parents' list of kid-friendly menus. Their smart move is to offer young diners a smaller portion of the featured wood-grilled fish of the day.

2 HEALTHY AND WHOLESOME. Ask any parents their top considerations in purchasing snacks and meals for their children, and wholesomeness, health and convenience are usually high on the list. How wholesome are the offerings on your kids' menu? Where can produce fit in? Where can you grill or roast instead of deep-fry? Consider where best to put your organic efforts.

Technomic's research found that 67 percent of parents of children ages 9 to 11 don't order for their children from the kids' menu at fast-food restaurants because portion sizes are too small. While some chains are resorting to bigger kid-sized portions, such as McDonald's Mighty Kids Meal, smaller versions of adult items might better meet their needs, while at the same time attracting women, those watching their weight and hearty snackers. After all, T.G.I. Friday's has enjoyed enormous success with its Right Portion, Right Price menu positioning.

Another menu consideration is kids' busy lifestyles. NPD's July 2007 surveys report that "dashboard dining" shows the strongest growth among parties with kids under the age of 13. That means new, easy-to-eat, grab-and-go foods and snacks are a must.

Nearly one-quarter (24 percent) of parties with kids ordered their meals at drive-thrus in

2007. While dinner traffic remained flat, lunch and morning meals have seen strong growth, with the morning meal accounting for 13 percent of traffic from parties with kids under the age of 13, and lunch accounting for 29 percent.

HEALTHFUL MAKEOVERS

Over the last few years, healthful versions of packaged foods for kids have outsold regular versions three to one, according to Information Resources Inc. (IRI). The group's HealthFocus 2007 Trend Report found 73 percent of moms say health is the most important influencer in trying a new food brand or item for their kids, just above "I know my kids will eat it."

Nearly all families pursue healthful eating strategies at least sometimes, and 64 percent do so regularly, reports FMI. Adding more fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat

3 FAMILY TIME. With less leisure time to spend together, families seek out experiences they can enjoy as a group while satisfying everyone's individual needs. The kids' menu doesn't have to be relegated to the last page in the corner of the menu. Try offering plentiful sampler plates designed for family sharing and intergenerational appeal.

4 FRIENDLY SPACES. How are you speaking to kids on your menu board, in your decor and in the overall experience? You don't have to add big plastic furniture to be in tune with younger diners. Work on creating a "home away from home" setting that offers a colorful, engaging place, complete with a menu of healthy offerings for kids and parents to share.

5 GLOBAL TASTES. Spaghetti, pizza and tacos remain high on the kid-craveables list but are hardly considered ethnic cuisine any longer. Today's children develop a taste for international foods from an early age, and menus are starting to reflect and encourage that. Children may be picky eaters but they also love adventure and appreciate creativity within familiar boundaries. Take a page from Kabuki Japanese Restaurant's book. This 10-unit casual-dining concept in Southern California, Phoenix and Las Vegas features 10 items on its kids' menu, including sesame chicken, vegetable tempura and chicken teriyaki, served with rice and salad.

Repackaging familiar favorites, like potatoes in crispy wonton wrappers, keeps kids interested and eager for repeat visits.



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dairy products and avoiding trans fats all top the list of healthful influencers. Over the last two years, moms have also tried to increase their children's consumption of poultry, seafood and low-fat/light foods.

Sugar tops the list of food items moms have cut back on in their kids' diets over the past two years, notes IRI's HealthFocus; 32 percent cut back on caffeine; 31 percent slashed sodium; 30 percent avoided high-fructose corn syrup, and 27 percent restricted food with additives and preservatives. NPD's National Eating Trends 2007 Survey reports that carbonated soft drinks and cakes fell off the list of children's most frequently consumed snacks for the first time.

With one in five parents admitting to having an overweight child aged 6 to 18, and with the American Heart Association beginning to address heart-health concerns in children, the fat and calorie levels of

children's menus will come under even greater scrutiny. A recent Center for Science in the Public Interest review of kids' meals at 13 top restaurant chains found that 93 percent of the meal options exceed the 430 calories the National Institute of Medicine recommends for those aged 4 to 8. Moreover, 45 percent of these kids' meals are too high in saturated and trans fat; 86 percent are too high in sodium.

GOOD AND PURE

Wholesomeness is another important part of the "mom appeal." Freshness, the descriptor most likely to signal a healthy food or beverage eaten away from home, is extremely important to 59 percent of moms, reports HealthFocus. All-natural claims are extremely important to another 29 percent. Despite these findings, descriptors denoting freshness rarely appear on children's menus.

FIGURE 3

NOT-SO-FOREIGN FLAVORS

Ethnic foods families eat regularly at home

% Households with Kids:

Any	96%
Italian	73%
Mexican	76%
Asian	65%
TexMex	24%
Cajun	15%
Greek	9%
Spanish	13%
German	8%
Soul food	10%
Creole	8%
French	4%
Indian	6%
Middle Eastern	5%

SOURCE: MULTI-SPONSOR SURVEYS INC. THE 2007 GALLUP STUDY OF DINNER



Giving chips and salsa a sweet spin with cinnamon-sugar crisps and fruit salsa is a fun way to make dessert interactive, flavorful and unique.

Moreover, 47 percent of moms are extremely or very concerned about processed foods. Pizza Hut is hitting the bulls-eye with The Natural pizza, free from additives and preservatives and made with multi-grain crust.

Increasingly, moms are also policing their kids' meals for any sign of hormones and antibiotics. The International Dairy-Deli-Bakery Association reports that no-hormones and no-antibiotics labeling is very important to half of frequent grocery shoppers who have children at home; 38 percent look for foods with no additives/preservatives. Another 15 percent cite all-natural as important.

"Organic" and "local" are two more claims parents increasingly want to see for their children's foods. More than half of mothers bought organic foods for their pre-teen children last year, according to the 2007 Gallup Study of Natural and Organic Food and Beverage Habits. Technomic's American Express Market Brief (August 2008) reports that three in five family-dining and casual-dining operators menu local foods.

SNACKING POWER

With dinner being eaten closer to 7 p.m. these days, 55 percent of all growth in the restaurant industry is coming from snacks, according to NPD (February 2008). Because women and moms already account for more

than half of afternoon QSR snack visits, kids' hold-me-over snacking is a very big idea.

"Satisfies appetite" is the attribute most important to parents when choosing a snack for their kids, right after "my child wants to eat it," according to Mintel's Kids' Snacking report from March 2008. Better health is a better bet here, too. Six in 10 parents are looking for snacks with added nutrients, 58 percent want controlled portion sizes, 46 percent seek choices lower in fat, and 36 percent want fewer calories in kids' snacks, according to IRI's 2008 Snacking Report.

A 2008 study by the Perishables Group reports that bananas, apples, grapes, strawberries, other berries and citrus are the fruits that parents most frequently purchase for their kids. While fresh fruit, cookies and salty foods top the list of the most frequently consumed snacks, one-third of children aged 6 to 11 also regularly eat savory snacks, such as pizza rolls, between meals, reports Mintel. NPD reports that typical "mom-packed" treats for away-from-home snacking include fruit, yogurt, cookies, snack bars, cheese, vegetables, pudding cups, fruit rolls or bits, crackers and crispy squares. Sweet, fruity "salsa" with cinnamon pita chips, fresh fruit in ice cream cones topped with a dollop of fruity yogurt or fruit-filled empanada dip sticks are fun snack ideas for kids.

While young children prefer sweet snack flavors, interest in spicy flavors increases with age. Younger children also slightly favor cheesy flavors, single flavors and typical flavor combinations (fruit and cream, chocolate-nut) according to IRI's 2007 Snack Report. One-third of kids aged 6 to 12 say that really unusual flavors and strong flavors make snacks more fun for them, reports Mintel.

Flavor combos have strong appeal for 6- to 12-year olds. According to International Flavors and Fragrances, jalapeño-cheddar chili, sizzlin' fajita and spicy Thai peanut are among the up-and-coming kids' snack flavors.

FIGURE 4

FLAVORS
KIDS
SAVOR

The new kid-classics

1. Sour cream & onion
2. Honey mustard
3. Jalapeño cheddar
4. Taco
5. Pepperoni pizza
6. Barbecue honey
7. Parmesan
8. Chili cheese
9. Pickle
10. Salsa
11. Buffalo
12. Mac & cheese
13. Quesadilla
14. Bacon & cheese
15. Three cheese

SOURCE: INTERNATIONAL FLAVORS AND FRAGRANCES



U.S. HIGHBUSH BLUEBERRY COUNCIL

More breakfasts are taken on the fly, and fruit-yogurt-granola parfaits are a portable, delicious and nutritious way to go.

Three-cheese, pepperoni pizza and bacon and cheese are among the new kid-classic flavors (Figure 4).

KIDS BEVERAGES COUNT

With many restaurants serving similar children’s menu items, beverages can be an important differentiator. Carbonated soft drinks, milk and juice are the most-ordered drinks in restaurants for kids under 13, according to NPD, but carbonated soft drinks have recently lost some ground, while milk and juice are showing only the slightest growth.

Just about half the consumers in Technomic’s Dinner Occasion Consumer Trend Report of July 2008 agree that foodservice operators need to offer kids more beverage choices. Having the bar staff or a mixologist design a menu of tempting treats for young diners would make a splash. For beverages, berry, strawberry, cherry, chocolate, sour fruit, orange, grape, apple and watermelon are favorite thirst-quenching flavors, according to the 2007 Yankelovich Youth Monitor.

AIM HIGH

One of the most exciting dining opportunities is the increase in families visiting full-service restaurants. Chefs are creating special courses so that kids can keep pace with their parents

while also staying occupied. Family-style dining, scaled-down versions of grown-up meals, promotions such as Kids’ Night Out and special three-course prix fixe meals are on the rise.

Serve meals in compartmentalized bento boxes or little lazy Susans to maximize appeal. Sharing, sampling and interacting with their food — e.g., ripping and dipping flatbread — are other important food attributes for kids. Build-your-own bars and samplers to share and talk about with family members will satisfy parents’ and kids’ needs alike.

To put an extra-special kid spin on dining out, offer skewers of down-sized meats; think small with fingerling potatoes and baby vegetables. Consider special-presentation meals wrapped in parchment or colorful, veggie-stuffed ravioli and dip as a side.

For appetizers, try a cup of tomato or cheese soup with cheesy breadsticks to dip or mini tacos or empanadas with a mild Mexican dip. Start with a French amuse bouche bite, like a stuffed cucumber “cup,” and end with a wrapped chocolate treat to take to the car.

With desserts scaled back at regular weekday dinners, dessert away from home has become more of a treat. Try colorful ice cream bon bons or fresh-baked cookie pizzas with customizable toppings. Extend the fun of dipping to dessert, with fruit and brownie kabobs, served with raspberry dip.

From offering helpful kid options and creating fun, interactive family platters to serving plenty of grab-and-go snack opportunities, it’s time to imagine — and deliver — menus to meet the expanding demands of young gourmands. ☺

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TAKE-AWAY TIPS

- ▶ **FILL ‘EM UP:** Adjust portions for the 8-plus age group, who won’t be satisfied with plates geared to little ones
- ▶ **SPELL IT OUT:** Parents want assurance on the menu that their kids are getting fresh, wholesome foods