



Kids Grow More Comfortable With New Choices

A casual observer could be forgiven for thinking that nothing has changed in kids' eating habits over the last decade. After all, the top items on kids' menus are still chicken, burgers, hot dogs and pizza, according to the Foodservice Research Institute and Foodservice Dish. Burgers and cheeseburgers account for 19% of kids' menu choices, while hot dogs garner 9% and pizza gets 8%.

But take some time to look beneath the surface, and you'll notice that big changes are afoot on kids' menus across the country. Not only are kids going for healthier choices, but they're also expanding their interest into areas previously defined as "just for grown-ups." Meanwhile, smart operators are appealing to kids – with promotional ideas that go far beyond cute plastic toys.



Watching The Winners

A great place to observe these shifts is the 2005 winners of the "Best Kids' Menu in America Contest" from Restaurant Hospitality magazine. These winners are remarkable not only for their menu offerings, but also for their restaurant concepts, promotional executions and in-store materials such as menus and containers.

Which Wich?, the winner for the fast casual category, greets its kid customers with a counter that's specially sized for them. This makes it easy for kids to fill out their menu, which is printed on a paper lunch bag and offers just 4 sandwich choices along with 2 bread options, 4 drink choices and several add-on items for dessert. Kids get the bag back when they get their order; the bag has games on its reverse side like tic tac toe.

Denny's switched to a reusable, laminated kids' menu teamed with classic games like Candyland and Guess Who, which are disposable. The switch cost the 1,600-unit chain 40% less than its previous kids program. Meanwhile, Denny's sales of side items such as salads, grapes and cucumbers are up 5%. And now nearly half the young eaters choose a healthful side item, whereas in the past a majority went for the fries.

Change is also manifest in a more upscale setting – the six-unit California Café, where young patrons can order their own "bento box" under its Bento-a-Go-Go program. Parents don't mind the price (\$7.50 to \$8.50) because the boxes offer healthful choices such as chicken yakitori, steak kabobs, battered halibut and angel hair pomodoro. The bento boxes, which are available during all dayparts, have 4 compartments – one each for fruits, vegetables, a protein and a starch.

Innovation That Lures Kids' Appetites

You'll also find smart operators coming up with kid-oriented innovations in other foodservice sectors. The Westmoreland Country Club in Wilmette, Illinois offers a Build A Cake dessert. Kids are served a plain four-inch round cake and given crushed Oreos, three colors of frosting, M&M's and various sprinkles and gummy bears to decorate their cake. To distinguish themselves from their messier siblings, older kids can choose from items such as a strip steak (\$6.95), a chicken Caesar salad (\$4.50) or a grilled cheese sandwich (\$3.50).

Foodservice operators are responding to the allure of pre-packaged meals such as Kraft's Lunchables by offering their own versions. The 57-unit Lewisville Independent School District in Texas offers the "Spike-able", featuring the district's "Stay Healthy" mascot, Spike. Each one contains a peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich, a piece of fresh fruit, crispy veggie sticks with dipping sauce, milk and a packaged dessert.

While traditional kids' menu items still predominate across America, smart operators are covering their bases by offering more healthful items along with the burgers and hot dogs. What's more, they're finding new and innovative ways to add interest through packaging, promotion and signage that appeals to today's younger generations. Change happens slowly, but make no mistake – the trends are gaining ground.

Information in this article came from Restaurant Hospitality (June 2005), Foodservice Dish and other foodservice industry sources.