

# FLAVOR

## & THE MENU

ABOUT THE BUSINESS OF FLAVOR.



FLAVOR TRENDS, STRATEGIES *and* SOLUTIONS  
for Menu Development

Parents love small, nutritionally minded menu additions like whole-wheat wraps and more fresh produce, while great flavor, freshness and fun win over the kids.



# Stepping Up KIDS' MENUS

Successful kids' menus tie into larger culinary trends:  
fresh, healthy fare; bolder, more-sophisticated flavors; and interactive fun

BY AIMEE HARVEY & RITA NEGRETE

In recessionary times, restaurant operators work harder than ever to tempt families to splurge on a meal out, and that means structuring menus to be family friendly. One tactic is to create bargains packaged as family meal deals: "Kids eat free" specials are popular, as are kids' meals offered for as little as 99 cents. Boston Market has extended its popular "two kids eat free" promotion, and Quaker Steak & Lube even tested a "parents eat free" offering for families purchasing a kid's meal.

Perhaps the most striking development this year, however, is the rollout of kids' menus at restaurants that have never offered them before, including full-service operations like P.F. Chang's China Bistro and The Cheesecake Factory and fast-casual chains like Chipotle Mexican Grill and Qdoba.

It makes sense: Families are making compromises so they can keep going out to eat, and bringing the kids along means saving on a babysitter. Rather than price-slashing, putting kid-appropriate fare and tempting flavors on the menu at family-friendly prices could be the dealmaker that drives families to choose one restaurant over another.

## KIDS VOTE FOR FLAVOR

Price is not the only lure, however. While most kids' menus still concentrate on such standards as grilled-cheese sandwiches, chicken nuggets, quesadillas and mac and cheese, plenty of new kids'-menu trends are gaining traction. The latest trends tie into the bigger culinary picture, with fresh and healthy fare and a growing willingness to

experiment with bolder, more-sophisticated flavors. Kids, notoriously picky eaters, are becoming more adventurous when dining out. Both they and their parents are more ready than ever to try something new on the children's menu.

Technomic Information Services' 2009 studies, the "Kids' Marketing & Menu Report" and "Kids & Moms Consumer Trend Report," uncover some old standards and new directions on kids' menus. Old favorites — chicken fingers, cheese pizzas and peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches — aren't going anywhere. What is evolving is flavor, with chipotle, teriyaki and other ethnic-inspired flavor accents on the rise. Operators are also answering parents' call for more variety and healthier items on the kids' menu.

An analysis of Technomic's MenuMonitor searchable, online database shows that standard kids' entrées remained the most-popular children's fare in restaurants in 2009. Where innovation showed up was in dips and sauces. For instance, flavor profiles for conventional breaded-chicken offerings were punched up with dipping sauces in the sweet-spicy category, including barbecue, honey-mustard and sweet-and-sour flavors.

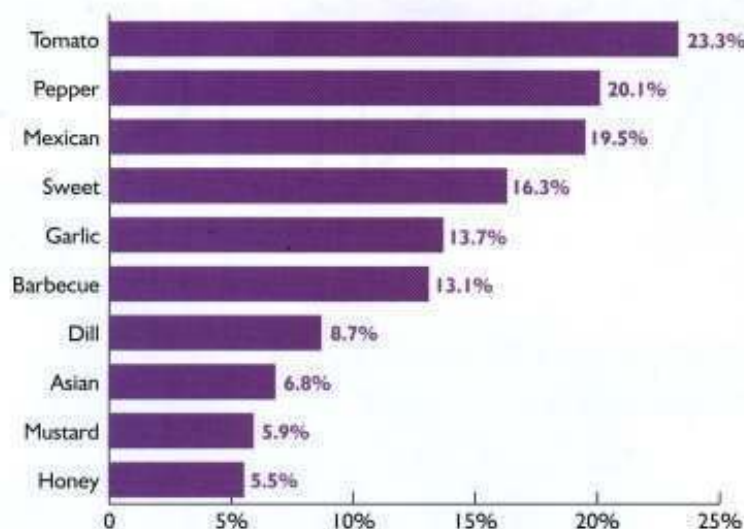
For kids' pasta entrées, marinara sauce remained popular, but more kids' menus in the leading 250 full-service restaurants listed garlic Alfredo and basil pesto sauces to vary the flavor (see Table 1).

MenuMonitor data showed that at emerging chains and independent restaurants, chipotle and teriyaki sauces popped up frequently on kids' menu, signaling a growing

TABLE 1

## Top of the Tops

Leading Flavors Among the Top 250 FSR Kids' Offerings



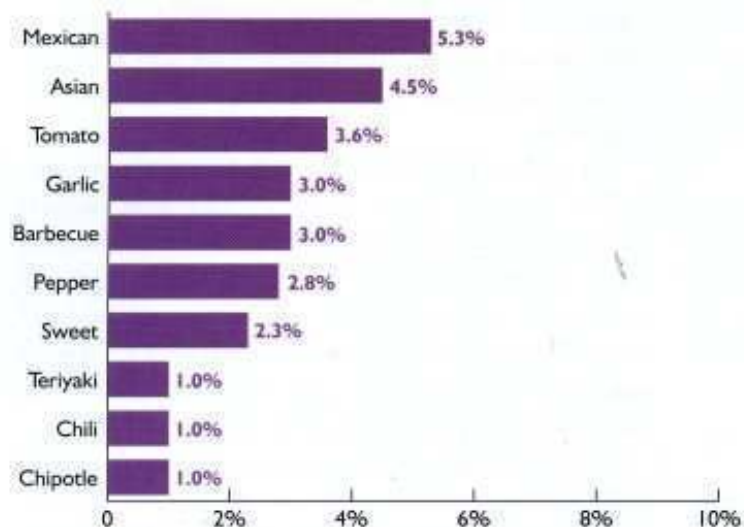
Base: 1,455 incidents in the Top 250 Classification and Fine-Dining, Mid-scale and Casual-Dining Segments

SOURCE: 2009 KIDS' MARKETING & MENU REPORT, TECHNOMIC INFORMATION SERVICES

TABLE 2

## Top of the Indies

Leading Flavors Among Emerging/Independent FSR Kids' Offerings



Base: 359 incidents in the Emerging-Chain Classification and Fine-Dining, Mid-scale and Casual-Dining Segments

SOURCE: 2009 KIDS' MARKETING & MENU REPORT, TECHNOMIC INFORMATION SERVICES

acceptance and recognition of bolder, spicier ethnic flavors. Globally inspired standouts for children were typically represented by Asian or Mexican flavor profiles (see Table 2).

Some of the more interesting dips and sauces on kids' menus:

- ▶ **Big Bowl's** Grilled Chicken Satay consists of three tamarind-glazed chicken skewers served with jasmine rice and a spicy peanut dipping sauce; its Small Bites Combo pairs two chicken satays with two chicken potstickers, jasmine rice and plum and spicy-peanut sauces.
- ▶ **Denny's** new High Diving Veggies offer celery, cucumbers and carrots with breadsticks and ranch dressing; its new Apple Dunkers are cut apples with caramel dipping sauce.
- ▶ At **China Grill**, the Kids' Rodizio Fire Pit includes Bacon-Wrapped Jerk-Spiced Chicken with a chipotle-guava barbecue sauce.
- ▶ **Pick Up Stix** serves a very grown-up-sounding "caramelized sauce of garlic and soy" with the House Special chicken on the kids' menu.
- ▶ **Little Gourmet** in Napa, Calif., menus Snakes and Worms, soy-marinated chicken strips over warm soba noodles, tossed with diced vegetables and served with savory peanut-butter sauce.
- ▶ In New York City, **Landmarc** embellishes its kids' Green Eggs and Ham with house-made pesto sauce.
- ▶ **Macayo's Mexican Kitchen** has a new Small Amigos menu; kids' meals come with two sopapilla sticks and a side of caramel dipping sauce for dessert.

### BETTER HEALTH FOR ALL

While children may influence where a family dines out, it's a parent's vote that matters most. Today, adults are becoming more aware of the nutritional values of foods as well as food-sourcing issues and are seeking out more fresh, local, natural or organic ingredients on menus. Restaurants committed to brightening the "health halo" of their menu must extend their efforts to more-wholesome kids' offerings.

Many of today's adult restaurant consumers are motivated by a desire to eat locally

# BAR NONE

**Wine bars, pubs and fine-dining places are not only allowing kids, they're rolling out the red carpets to the junior set**

With beverages and food having equal weight in many on-trend dining concepts, from modern taverns to wine bars and tapas places, some savvy operators are inviting parents to bring along the kids, all the while capturing earlier dinner seatings and upselling to the whole family.

At the four-unit, Seattle-based Purple Café & Wine Bar, children can get schooled, along with the parents, on "the fine art of grazing," with a kids' menu of hearty sandwiches, pizza, grilled salmon and chicken, seasonal vegetables and a milk flight. Similarly, Nibblers Eatery & Wine Bar in Pleasant Hill, Calif., takes the small-plate approach to the kids with a "Little Nibblers" menu. Kids can choose from "a nip of cheese and crackers," a dish of banana chips or petite tomato toasties, among other tastes. Pizzas, sweets and an extensive beverage list with lots of sparkling fruit drinks are also on offer.

For operators who want to let families enjoy the neighborhood-pub atmosphere, consider the Yard House approach. Known for "the world's largest selection of draft beer," Yard House has cultivated a popular "Kid's Klub," offering a 12-page activity book and kids' meals bundled with "Kustom Kooler" fruit sodas and whole-fruit frozen strawberry bars. Parents can enjoy a draft beer knowing the kids are eating well; fish and chips, burgers and other pub favorites are offered with an extensive list of sides, including buttered broccoli with melted cheese, jasmine rice and a green salad.

Even the finest of fine-dining establishments are embracing the kids. At Aura in Boston's Seaport Hotel, chef Rachel Klein's experience as a mom prompted her to launch Friday-night "Fine Dining, Family Style" specials. Seatings start at 5:30 p.m., as parents relax with a \$30 three-course menu while kids — even babies — enjoy gourmet, health-minded versions of favorites like vegetable purees, chicken tenders and grilled cheese. They also get whisked away to their own "romper room" with books, movies, special art projects and other activities.

"You can't just go to McDonald's all the time," says Klein. "There are a lot of savvy people out there who still want to have a real dining-out experience, but they also want to be with their kids."

— Kathy Hayden

sourced meat, fish and produce and to see more organic foods and fewer processed foods on the menu. These preferences are being passed on to their children.

The ability to develop menu offerings around a culinary focus on local, organic or natural foods is a trademark of independent concepts that operate in the high-end, fine-dining realm. Parents who frequent these types of concepts and value these food attributes are beginning to steer their children away from the standard mac-and-cheese and chicken-finger entrées in favor of premium cuts of meat, baked or grilled chicken, fresh seafood and organic vegetables.

Aside from the increasing incidence of vegetables and fruits on kids' menus as side-item options, MenuMonitor reveals that much of the development around healthier fare can be found in the increasing number of items described as organic or natural and in children's beverage selections. Other health-conscious trends of note: whole-grain breads and pastas, yogurt as a dipping sauce for fruit, "squeezable" yogurt products that factor in some fun, sugar-free syrups for breakfast and the continuing emphasis on "fresh" offerings, particularly in fruit sides and toppings.

Some of the key examples of better-for-kids dishes appearing on current kids' menus across different restaurant segments and price points include a focus on natural and organic ingredients:

- ▶ **Panera Bread's** selections for kids include sandwiches made with organic American cheese or all-natural peanut butter on white whole-grain bread, served with organic apple juice, white or chocolate milk and squeezable organic yogurt.
- ▶ The four-unit, Newport Beach, Calif.-based **Blue Water Grill's** Pocket Pizza is built with a whole-wheat pita, tomato sauce, ground organic turkey and low-fat mozzarella.
- ▶ **The Little Gourmet** in Napa, Calif., features whole-wheat pizza crusts and homemade, organic sauce; its Boulders 'n Logs is a grinder roll stuffed with organic meatballs, melted mozzarella cheese and organic tomato sauce.



- ▶ **Big Bowl's** BBQ Pork Chow Fun pairs naturally raised pork with silky noodles and vegetables.
- ▶ **McMenamin's** Kid's Burger is a quarter-pound, natural-beef patty, served with pickles and secret sauce on the side, and comes with a choice of veggie sticks, apple slices, fresh-cut fries or Tater Tots.

Offering more choices is always a good way to go with kids, especially when including more fresh vegetables and fruits.

Innovative menus are showing more side options, allowing kids to pick two from an extensive list. Another trend is for restaurants to add a packaged fruit or vegetable option to the usual fries and chips.

- ▶ **Starbucks** rolled out Starbucks Snack-Fulls, a kids' pack that includes organic apple slices, a box of raisins, string cheese and Annie's Bunny Grahams snacks.
- ▶ **First Watch's** Hamwich and Turkeywich sandwiches feature Monterey Jack cheese and sourdough bread and are served with a side of fresh fruit.
- ▶ **Claim Jumper's** Mini Burgers and other kids' offerings come with a choice of two sides; kids can choose from a list that includes roasted vegetables, green salad, organic corn, fries, mac and cheese, carrots and celery sticks with ranch dip, frozen grapes, applesauce and sliced apples with caramel sauce.

Smaller versions of regular menu favorites appeal to kids and parents and can help capture early dinner traffic.



TYSON

- ▶ **CPK ASAP** concepts introduced a kids' salad with romaine leaves, a choice of dressing and cheddar Goldfish crackers.
- ▶ **Burger King's** BK Fresh Apple Fries are skinless, sliced apples cut and packaged to resemble the chain's french fries; the chain also offers organic unsweetened applesauce.
- ▶ **Bob Evans' Fruit Dippers** are seasonal fresh fruit served with low-fat strawberry yogurt for dipping.
- ▶ **Big Boy** introduced a Kids' Smart Start breakfast that includes apple slices along with hot oatmeal and yogurt.

#### MINI ME MENUS

An easier approach to serving today's more-sophisticated young diners and pleasing their parents is simply to offer smaller portions of dishes on the regular menu. Innovative independent and chain restaurants are promoting this "kid-adult fusion" approach, a trend being defined as much by parents as kids — perhaps more so. These downsized portions have the potential to drive early-seating traffic.

- ▶ **IHOP** offers a Jr. Fish meal, a tilapia fillet served with steamed broccoli and fresh lemon.
- ▶ **Disney's California Grill** menus a kids' Grilled Petite Filet Mignon served with Yukon Gold potatoes and BlueLake beans.
- ▶ **Joe's Crab Shack** offers a kids' portion of snow crab with choice of fries, veggies or mixed-fruit cup.
- ▶ Florida multi-unit **TooJay's Original Gourmet Deli** rolled out a Jr. Tuna Melt on a toasted English muffin with tomato and melted Muenster.
- ▶ **The Old Spaghetti Factory** offers a kid-sized portion of spinach-and-cheese ravioli, served with a salad or applesauce.
- ▶ **Ruby Foo's Times Square**, part of the B.R. Guest Restaurants group, introduced Pork Spare Ribs with sweet-and-sour sauce, served to kids in a to-go box, as well as Ruby's Noodles with chicken, steamed broccoli, udon noodles and teriyaki.
- ▶ At seven-unit, Chicago-based **SushiSamba**, the Sushi Bites are four bite-sized rice balls topped with tuna, yellowtail, salmon and cucumber; the Baby Bento is filled with

grilled organic chicken, steak or salmon, served with purple Peruvian mashed potatoes, nori-wrapped rice, vegetable rolls and seasonal fruit skewers; both come with a sundae or sweet mochi rice for dessert.

#### RETHINKING BEVERAGES

With concerns about the possible role of high-fructose corn syrup in obesity, and kids and adults alike exhibiting boredom with standard soft drinks, beverages have become more points of flavor and health innovation on the kids' menu. Smoothies and milk shakes, appropriate as snacks or desserts, are also proliferating. Some of the more-comprehensive lines of smoothie offerings include Bahama Breeze's Kid's Koolers, Bugaboo Creek Steak House's Bugaboo Blenders, Red Lobster's Casco Bay Coolers and a number of creatively named smoothies listed for kids at Bubba Gump Shrimp Co.

Some other creative examples:

- ▶ **SushiSamba** offers specialty kid drinks like Coco Leite, with coconut milk, pineapple and mango juice; Watermelon Mojo, with watermelon, lime and guava juice; and Berry Fizz, with raspberry, blackberry and lime juice and soda.
- ▶ The Northwest chain **Ram Restaurant & Brewery** introduced Strawberry Lemonade and Strawberry Lemonade Freezer.
- ▶ At **Cattlemens** restaurants, a group of eight family-owned northern-California steakhouses, the kids' menu includes a Western RoseFruity Colada, cranberry-and-pineapple Cowboy Quencher and a Corral Cooler strawberry smoothie.

#### ON THE CUSP OF CHANGE

One of the key takeaways from our kids' menu research is that, while the 12-and-under crowd may not be as sophisticated as teens or adults when it comes to dining, they still enjoy many of the same tastes in restaurants and are open to trying what the grown-ups are having: new flavors, fresh, wholesome ingredients, ethnic accents, plenty of sauces and dips. Better variety on the menu and ingredients that add an interactive aspect to the meal and dining experience are some other kid-approved ideas.



NATIONAL STARCH

Operators who recognize children's full dining potential are on the cusp of what's happening today in kids' menu development and can gain significant competitive advantage with families. ☺

Sweet-spicy combinations and global influences are making waves in dips and sauces, giving kid favorites like chicken tenders and pasta a much-needed flavor injection.

AIMEE HARVEY is editor at Technomic Information Services, the publishing arm of Technomic Inc., a leading foodservice research and consulting firm.

RITA NEGRETE, senior editor at Technomic Information Services, can be e-mailed at [rnegrete@technomic.com](mailto:rnegrete@technomic.com).

#### TAKE-AWAY TIPS

**POUR ON THE SAUCE:** Offer several sauce options and encourage dipping for everything, from apple slices to bread and skewers

**BE WHOLESOME:** Small changes like whole-wheat pasta, baked "fries" or chips and organic milk get parental approval

**BE FRUITFUL:** Add packaged dried fruit, sliced fresh fruit, whole bananas or bunches of grapes as easy and nutritious side options

**PLAY WITH YOUR PORTIONS:** Menuing smaller versions of best sellers from the adult menu is an easy way to please the whole family and get kids to branch out

**BUDDY SYSTEM:** Try special kids-only beverage pairings for add-on sales and more fun