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FOOD

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INTO THE MOUTHS OF BABES

KIDS ARE MORE ADVENTUROUS
THAN RESTAURANTS THINK
BY DEVRA FIRST

KIDS' MENU? OH, GROW UP!

Restaurants offer chicken fingers, but it could be the small set want sushi or pho, fajitas or dumplings

BY DEVRA FIRST | GLOBE STAFF

Oliver Bentley is 8 years old. His sister, Anna, is 6. At Zenna Noodle Bar in Brookline, the two are waiting for their Asian noodle soups to arrive. In the meantime, they're eating fresh rolls with peanut sauce and clams. "They're interested in food," says their father, Chris. They like sushi, Mexican, and Italian. Anna loves lox, and she'll often have capers as a snack. As a baby, Oliver adored baba ghanoush.

Down the street at the Japanese restaurant GinGa, Jack Broomhead, 5, is gleefully sucking down salmon sashimi and shrimp tempura. And at Dok Bua Thai Kitchen, Hannah Siegenberg, 10, and her sister Julia, 17, are drinking tea and sharing a Thai appetizer of dried shrimp, lime, chilies, and Chinese broccoli wrapped in spinach leaves. Hannah's choice for where to celebrate her recent birthday: the Japanese restaurant Fugakyu.

Children's tastes have become more sophisticated. Yet look at kids' menus around town and you see the same dishes again and again: chicken fingers, grilled cheese, spaghetti, hot dogs (as if you need the list recited for you).

"It's a vicious cycle," says Nancy Tringali Pibo, author of the book "My Two-Year-Old Eats Octopus: Raising Children Who Love to Eat Everything." "Restaurants have those things on menus because they think that's what parents want, and parents order

them because they're there."

The obvious problem with children's menus is their nutritional value. Offerings are often high in fat, sodium, and sugar. "Most kids' menus don't even come with a vegetable," says Allison Lauretti, lead clinical psychologist in the Optimal Weight for Life Program at Children's Hospital Boston, which evaluates and treats children who are overweight. "When we go out to dinner, we have to order a vegetable off the regular menu to give to the kids."

This has started to change. In a survey of hot trends for 2009 conducted by the National Restaurant Association, nutritionally balanced kids' dishes ranked number 4 (right between organic produce and new cuts of meat), mentioned by 81 percent of the more than 1,600 chefs polled. Legal Sea Foods, for example, serves kids' meals with fresh fruit and vegetables, unsalted fries, and nuggets made from naturally raised chicken. (It was named the



Dorothea Dixon Dunne, 6, eats chicken and pasta at a Fine Dining Family-Style Friday night at Aura at the Seaport



PHOTOS BY ESSORAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Clockwise from top left: Chef Rachel Klein at Aura; Anna Bentley, 6, eating chicken noodle soup at Zenna Noodle Bar in Brookline; pureed fruits and Cheerios at Aura; Caleigh Sutton, 6 (left), Amaya Sutton, 8, and Spencer Dunne at Aura; grilled cheese, sliced bananas, chicken fingers, and fries, also at Aura.

best family restaurant in a 2008 Parenting magazine poll.) At Aura in the Seaport Hotel, chef Rachel Klein has instituted Fine Dining Family-Style nights, where the food is made in house, down to the seasonal purees for babies. "It's not a freezer-to-fryer kind of experience," she says. "If you're going to feed your kid pizza — and more power to you, I know I do — at least you know it's being made and not out of a box." And at chain restaurants such as Denny's, Uno Chicago Grill, and Red Robin, parents now find some lighter options, whole grains, and fruits and vegetables on the menu.

But even when kids' food is healthier, it is often, as Gabriel Fortney, 8, of West Roxbury succinctly puts it — "booring!" A baked chicken finger is still a chicken finger. Chefs work hard to craft

interesting food for adults. If a restaurant goes to the trouble of creating a children's menu, it should offer them a comparably interesting experience. In a lunch bag or at home, peanut butter and jelly is lovely. At a restaurant, peanut butter and jelly is lazy. It's time for kids' menus to grow up.

"Everyone likes chicken fingers and burgers, but they're pretty boring and always the same," says Connor Daitch, 13, of Norton.

"I think kids' menus are unimaginative," says Matthew Amster-Burton, who writes about eating adventurously with his daughter, Iris, 5, in the book "Hungry Monkey." "I'm not so much concerned about the health aspect, but for me the fun of having a kid and being a person who loves food is sharing the food I love with my kid. The kids' menu

says exactly the opposite. It says: I'm going to eat this and you're going to eat that, and we're not going to have a shared experience."

That's the heart of the matter: the shared experience, what eating is all about. But if urging kids to consume Japanese soba and Mexican mole feels too foodie-yuppie (fuppie?), consider how eating habits are formed. While some food preferences are innate, others are learned. "Kids tend to prefer sweets initially," Lauretti says. "The two most important predictors after that are exposure and role modeling." Then there's the behavioral reinforcement of giving children the same menu items over and over, accompanied by fun toys and crayons and games. "It forms the foundation of what they come to expect

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Looks count at first tastings

Continued from preceding page when going out for meals," Lauretti says. Parents don't want chicken fingers for dinner — not all the time, at least. And parents don't want their children growing up to want them either.

"I want my kid to eat healthy and have a really broad experience with food, flavors, and textures," says Klein. "I don't want him to be grilled cheese

guy." (Her son loves Indian masala sauce, fajitas at Acapulco, tomatoes with aged balsamic vinegar, and medium-rare steak.)

I see that thought bubble above your head, the one that reads: "But so many kids are picky eaters!" Let's think of it as discerning. They like what they like, as adults do. It's just different stuff. (Witness Elmo.)

Research shows that children

prefer colorful food, Lauretti says. "Most restaurant food, like macaroni and cheese or chicken nuggets, has less color, yet they come to prefer that. Take a bunch of vegetables and make a smiley face out of them on the plate. If you serve a salad as you would to an adult, it's not going to seem so interesting to them." Many kids will choose apples over fries with their Happy Meals at McDonald's, she says: The fruit is colorful, and what they really care about is the toy.

Piho suggests restaurants serve smaller portions of the same things adults can order, perhaps with spicy or "superweird" dishes toned down a little. "It needs to look good," she says. "But it should be a modified version of what an adult might expect a nice entrée to look like."

Amster-Burton recommends variety. "Kids don't like to be presented with one food and told, 'This is one thing and you're going to eat it.' It's a tough position to put a kid in psychologically. It will make the most mild-mannered kid a rebel." Adults don't like it much either.

This is why sushi — all raw and fishy, the quintessence of what you might think kids would find "yucky" — can in fact be the perfect kid food. It's colorful. There's variety. It's fun to dip it in soy sauce. It's fun to pick it up and eat it with your hands. Less expensive but equally satisfying are Chinese dumplings, seldom more than a few dollars per plate.

Putting more variety and sophistication on kids' menus sn't just good for children and the parents who love them. It's good for restaurants. Rich Velante, executive chef and executive vice president at Legal Sea Foods, notes that the kids' menu offers fun-to-eat popcorn shrimp, half-lobsters with the meat cut up, even fish-shaped cheese ravioli. "Instead of just providing chicken fingers and things of that nature, we felt strongly we should also offer items jump-starting children into seafood."

Klein, the chef at Aura, says, "Kids are our future customers."

Nonetheless, she believes chicken fingers are what kids want nine times out of 10. For now, she may be right. Lauretti says children often need to be exposed to a new food a full 15 to 20 times before it's clear whether they don't like it or are simply reacting to unfamiliarity.

Ants on a tree

Serves 3 (including 1 child)

"Hungry Monkey" author Matthew Amster-Burton writes that this Chinese dish is his family's favorite dinner. Cellophane noodles are the trees, the ground pork in a dark soy sauce looks like ants, and the dish is loaded with red chili and Szechuan peppercorns (you can omit these and the dish is still terrific).

- 8 ounces ground pork
- 4 tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon hot bean paste
- 1 teaspoon cornstarch
- 8 ounces cellophane noodles (bean threads)
- 2 tablespoons peanut oil
- 2 scallions, thinly sliced
- 1 red jalapeno or other small chili pepper, seeded and finely chopped
- ½ cup chicken stock
- ¼ teaspoon ground Szechuan peppercorns (optional)

1. In a bowl, combine the pork, 2 tablespoons of the soy sauce, the sugar, bean paste, and cornstarch. Mix well, cover, and refrigerate for 20 minutes.

2. In another bowl, place the noodles and add enough boiling water to cover them. Use chopsticks to stir the noodles in the water. Set aside for 5 minutes; drain into a colander.
3. In a large skillet over medium-high heat, heat the oil. When it is hot, add the scallions and jalapeno or other chili. Cook, stirring, for 30 seconds. Add the pork and cook, stirring constantly, for 3 minutes or until it is no longer pink.
4. Add the chicken stock, remaining 2 tablespoons of soy sauce, and Szechuan peppercorns, if using. Bring to a boil. Add the noodles and toss well.
5. Divide the noodles among 3 bowls. Adapted from "Hungry Monkey"

Penne with Brussels sprouts and bacon

Serves 3 (including 1 child)

- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 10 ounces penne
- 4 thick slices bacon, cut into ½-inch pieces
- ½ pound Brussels sprouts, quartered
- ½ cup chicken stock
- ½ cup grated Parmesan

1. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Drop in the penne and stir well. Cook, stirring occasionally, for 8 minutes or until it is tender but still has some bite. Drain the pasta into a colander and return it to the pot.

2. Meanwhile, in a large skillet, render the bacon, turning often,

- until it is golden brown all over. Transfer to a plate lined with paper towels. Remove all but 2 tablespoons bacon fat from the skillet.
3. Add the Brussels sprouts to the bacon fat. Cook over medium-high heat, stirring often, for 3 minutes or until lightly browned. Add the stock, salt, and pepper. Bring to a boil, lower the heat, and cover the pan. Cook the sprouts for 5 to 6 minutes or until tender.
 4. Add the Brussels sprouts, bacon, and Parmesan to the penne. Stir gently. Taste for seasoning and add more salt and pepper, if you like. Adapted from "Hungry Monkey"



MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Hannah Siegenberg, 10, at Dok Bua Thai Kitchen in Brookline.

Spots for kids

Restaurant recommendations from our staff for families.

All's Roti For parents waging a never-ending battle to get kids to eat vegetables, order the veggie rotis — a scrumptious mix of potatoes, green beans, cabbage, and chickpeas, all wrapped in thin, flavorful dough. They're messy and fun to eat. A word of caution: Order a small and take it home. They're huge, enough for two or even three pint-size meals. If your wee gourmands don't like spice, think twice. Even the veggie rotis pack a little kick. 1188 Blue Hill Ave., Mattapan, 617-298-9850.

Crispi's No children's menu here, but kids can get a half-portion of any entrée for half price and there's no shortage of good Italian eats. 136 Broad St., Bridgewater, 508-697-6733, www.crispisrestaurant.com.

El Oriental de Cuba Very kid friendly with good Cuban food. 416 Centre St., Jamaica Plain, 617-390-7024, www.elorientaldecuba.com.

JP Seafood Cafe The wait staff is super kid-friendly, and the steamed shumai and miso soup never seem to fail. Plus, when they're bored, the big fish tank is a sure hit. 730 Centre Street, Jamaica Plain, 617-983-5177, www.jpseafoodcafe.com.

Redbones Lots of space with adult food that's perfect for kids. Kid's menu has baby back ribs and pulled pork sandwich, along with "catfingers" and fries. Flavorful, fun. 55 Chester St., Davis Square, Somerville, 617-628-2200, www.redbonesbbq.com.

Seoul Food The hot pot, which is a bowl of soupy Korean noodles and vegetables, is just right for kids to slurp. 1759 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, 617-864-6299.

The Charlie Horse Kids eat free on Wednesdays after 4 p.m., plus there are arcade games. What more do you want? 674 Old West Centre Street, West Bridgewater, 508-583-7252, www.thecharliehorse.com.

So let's give the kids some options. Continuing to offer them the same menu items again and again is like using baby talk with a gradeschooler: unnecessarily simplistic. Just ask adventurous eater Anna Bentley, who stops using her empty clamshells as castanets long enough to answer

a question. "Anna, is there any food you wouldn't try?" "Yes," she replies after a little thought. "Light bulbs."

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