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On the Plate

Kids' meals offer a playground of foodservice opportunities

By Renee Lee on May 23rd, 2016 | Comments (0)

Earlier this year, **IHOP** and **Applebee's** joined a number of national **restaurant** chains dropping soda from children's menus, offering choices like milk and juice in its place. In the past few years, operators from **McDonald's** to **Panera** have done the same thing, part of an effort to keep healthier beverages on tap for kids. Food menus for youngsters have also been beefed up – at nose-to-tail restaurant Salare in Seattle, the kids' meals are as sophisticated as the adult menu, with options like cauliflower soup with black beans and spring onion puree and a chicken drumstick with kale rapini and potatoes. Dallas-based Which Wich, with nearly 400 locations nationwide, launched a for-kids, tested-by-kids menu last year, designed to balance nutrition and taste with options like a breadless cheese and turkey rollup. As the kids' menu changes, whether it's at home or in restaurants, **Datassential** has all the latest insights in our latest MenuTrends Keynote Report: Kids' Meals, which surveyed parents and guardians for insights into what they already buy and what they *want* to buy. Here's just a spoonful of what's included in the full report:



(Photo: Flickr user **Jason Lander**)

Home is where the health is

While there has been plenty of coverage of restaurant chains adapting their menus for kids' palates, parents are, for the most part, feeding children at home. In line with the insights we uncovered in our recent MenuTrends Keynote Report on the "New Healthy," the majority of consumers are at least somewhat conscious of healthy eating, with 80% of parents saying they actively monitor what their kids eat and 85% saying their kids eat healthiest at home.

That doesn't necessarily mean they are cooking every from scratch, however – only about 1 in 5 consumers say they prepare all of their meals from scratch. This presents an opportunity for manufacturers who can help parents with kid-friendly, healthy pre-made or semi-scratch products or ingredients. Healthy kids' meals are the focus at San Francisco-based Peas of Mind, whose mantra, "All Natural Eats for Growing Kids," is applied to products like an "Uncured Pepperoni Peas of Pie" made with veggie dough and yielding 1.5 servings of vegetables in every pizza, plus milkshake smoothie kits with a full serving of fruits and vegetables in every shake and nearly 10 grams of protein.

Kids' preferences are integral to choosing a restaurant to eat at

Three out of four consumers eat out with their kids at least once a week and, when choosing a restaurant, an overwhelming 93% of parents say they take their kids' preferences into consideration. Keeping this veto vote in mind, it should be no surprise that restaurants across the country are becoming more conscious of what's being menued to kids. Some operators are starting to differentiate themselves and get out of the chicken strip rut (found on 60% of kids' menus) by following overall trends in the industry and offering health-conscious options, like apple slices or yogurt, or more adventurous proteins, including Angus beef and tuna, two of the top trending proteins on kids' menus today. Yet many operators are failing to market their kid-friendly options. Eight of ten operators say families are a very important way to drive

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repeat visits, but only three in ten actively market toward families – operators may need assistance with marketing strategies and materials to engage both parents and kids.

This is just a peek into our full report, which also gives you an overview of the constantly evolving K-12 schools segment (did you know 100% of schools serve chicken?), along with extensive insights from parents on what their kids want to eat across wide-ranging categories, from whole grains to fruits – are trendy Brussels sprouts still as nightmarish to kids as they once were? We also dive deep into the operator mindset – offering insights on what factors are most important to operators when creating kids' menus, what specific challenges they face with trying to please both children and their parents, and much more. We also compare how perceptions of K-12 menus differ between operators and parents – for instance, operators generally rate school meals higher than parents, but both parties believe variety and creativity could be improved upon.

Renee Lee is a publications specialist at Datassential, a supplier of trends, analysis and concept testing for the food industry. For more information about ordering Datassential's MenuTrends Keynote Report: Kids' Menus, contact Brian Darr at brian@datassential.com.

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