

# Child's Play

## Kids' menus now big on healthy options



by Sonya Bice

**Y**ou know things are changing when you order a hamburger at a drive-through and the cashier asks, "Would you like apples with that?"

For decades, children's menus at virtually every restaurant in the country were simple and surprisingly uniform. A study by Technomic, an industry research group, found the same basic foods on 195 children's menus: chicken strips and nuggets appeared most frequently, followed by burgers, grilled cheese, pizza, and mac and cheese. The standard child's menu has long offered a side of fries and a soft drink. And though restaurants routinely update menus to reflect trends and changing tastes, only recently has anyone evaluated children's menus in those terms.

Beginning early last year, restaurant companies in a variety of segments that cater to families started changing children's menus in ways that were simply unheard of. According to the National Restaurant Association, 41

percent of family and casual-dining restaurants report offering a greater variety of healthy options on their kids' menus than they did two years ago.

Apple Holler Restaurant in Sturtevant is one of them. Until about six months ago, the restaurant's kids' lunch and dinner meals automatically came with fries. But owner Dave Flannery decided he wanted to offer more choices. Each child's meal still comes with the restaurant's homemade applesauce, but instead of just fries, the side choices include mashed potatoes, baked beans, cinnamon apples, sweet potato casserole, sweet potato fries, or fresh fruit, served in a mixture including bananas, pineapple, pears and apples. "The fruit is in a natural fruit juice," Flannery points out. "It's just pennies more than the mixed fruit in syrup."

"As a drink option besides milk and soda, we also offer homemade apple cider, which has no additives, no preservatives, no sweeteners added."

"They can still get the same things they used to," he adds. "They're just basi-

**THOUGH RESTAURANTS ROUTINELY UPDATE MENUS TO REFLECT TRENDS AND CHANGING TASTES, ONLY RECENTLY HAS ANYONE EVALUATED CHILDREN'S MENUS IN THOSE TERMS.**

cally getting a lot more options than before."

The same is true at Mark's East Side in Appleton. General Manager Rhoda Steffel said last summer the restaurant significantly expanded its kids' menu. "We put on a broiled chicken breast, broiled haddock, and broiled shrimp, and gave them the option of baked potato, applesauce or a sauteed vegetable, instead of just the fries." The new options sell steadily, but Steffel says, "Mac and cheese is still the hottest seller."

Large operators have also made some dramatic changes.

McDonald's started offering a side of fresh sliced and peeled apples and a low-fat caramel dip as a choice in its Happy Meals.

Darden Restaurants' Red Lobster introduced children's menus featuring cucumbers and carrots with ranch dressing, along with grilled mahi-mahi, snow crab legs, and grilled chicken.

Benihana restaurants scrapped their standard kids' menu and introduced one

*continued on page 16*

continued from page 15

that was essentially a scaled down version of the adult menu: meats, vegetables and steamed rice.

Subway's "KidsPak," which once included a soft drink and cookie, now comes with juice and a fruit rollup.

Ruby Tuesday, with more than 700 restaurants in the country, eliminated french fries and soft drinks from its children's menu, offering as beverage choices reduced fat milk and 100 percent fruit juice. The dessert that comes with a child's meal is a tropical fruit bar.

Denny's has completely revamped its children's menu, adding sides of grapes, cucumber slices, and a vegetable of the day.

Applebee's has added sides of celery and carrots with dip, and steamed broccoli.

Wendy's began allowing milk to be substituted in its kids' meals and changed the packaging of milk from the time-less but hard-to-open carton to a plastic reclosable container.

Culver Franchising System of Prairie du Sac went a slightly different direction. It did make some menu changes; Culver's Frozen Custard restaurants had always offered milk as an option instead of soda, but they recently went to milk in plastic containers, added chocolate milk, and added applesauce as a side for kids at no additional charge. The biggest change was in the company's marketing program, which had for a while included a children's promotion where customers collected tokens to exchange for prizes like keychains and lunchboxes. When the company rolled out its Active Kids program in April 2003, it tweaked the promotion in a few ways. The program's not-so-subtle message: fun foods can be a part of a healthy lifestyle, and fun physical activity is an essential part of a healthy lifestyle, too.

"We slimmed down our mascot. We put a new kids section on our website. And we changed our prizes to kick balls, soccer balls, footballs and basketballs—real full-size ones, not little plush ones—things that would get kids up and active," says Barbara Behling, director of public relations for the company. "I couldn't give you another chain that does a program like that."

The new prizes were a hit. "We went through 90,000 kickballs in eight months," she says. "They flew out the door."

continued on page 18

## Wisconsin kids, Wisconsin restaurants

Wisconsin Restaurant Association staff members are very supportive of restaurants in many ways, including dining out every chance we get. (It's a tough job, but someone has to do it.) We checked in with some WRA moms and dads with small children: What restaurants do they find particularly welcoming to families? And if they stray from the chicken strips and fries, what menu item are the kids likely to order?



Danielle



Hayley



Lily

**Danielle, age 10** "Danielle recommends Taco Bell. Soft-shell tacos are a great food that kids can eat with their hands. Nachos and cheese are a great alternative to the french fry too."

**Nick, age 12** "Nick recommends Annie's American Cafe in Wausau which offers a fantastic breakfast buffet. When the family travels to Wausau for a hockey tournament, Nick and his hockey buddies enjoy a wonderful (kid friendly) breakfast."

**Hayley, age 6** "The restaurant that Hayley likes is the Hitching Post in Portage. Hayley loves going here not only because they have crayons and coloring pages for the kids, they also have grilled ham and cheese, chocolate milk and apple-sauce dinner. They also have popcorn to munch on while you are waiting for your table/dinner. It is a very family oriented, "kid friendly" restaurant."

**Lily, age 4** "For awhile we were delighted at her willingness to try new things and eat vegetables. (She gobbled up raw onions along with her chicken soft taco with rice and beans at Laredo's and Mi Cocina), but now she seems focused primarily on pasta (plain with just butter, maybe a little parmesan cheese). Even though she may not be interested in trying new things, I'm always happy to see different options on kid's menus.

If the kids menu isn't working for us, sometimes we'll order soup for her (Ella's Deli's matzo ball chicken noodle, Morel's mushroom bisque or clam chowder at Captain Bill's). Sometimes we'll order her an adult appetizer as an entrée (amazing selection of tapas at La Paella).

Hubbard Avenue Diner in Middleton makes real chicken tenders, not the processed kind, and I feel better about ordering her those. She also likes Porta Salads at Paisan's and Porta Bella Restaurant, noodle soups and spring rolls at Asian restaurants like Saigon Noodles, Bagel with cream cheese or soup at Panera, and a lot of things at Cheese Factory Restaurant in the Dells—a fun vegetarian place with lots of choices. She's really into the idea of dipping food into her own little private cups of sauce.

Kudos to restaurants that bring you a little plate of "emergency rations" for

continued on page 18

continued from page 16

So what happened?

After all, children across the land did not exactly rise up in protest and demand cucumbers, carrots and apples, milk, juice and low-fat desserts. Then again, given the rising rate of childhood obesity, maybe they just couldn't get up off the couch.

Various reasons have been offered for the renewed attention to children's nutrition and restaurant food. Among them are the threat of obesity lawsuits, increased national attention to obesity and its attendant health problems, and the popularity of the Atkins diet and other similar diets. Others speculate that families are now eating out more often, rather than as a rare treat, and want "real meals" for the kids. What seems most likely is that as restaurants responded to strong consumer demand for healthy options on adult menus, it was only natural to look at the options on the children's menu as well. The interest is also driven by these facts:

- According to research by foodservice research company Technomic and the Bureau of Labor Statistics cited in the Wall Street Journal in a January 11 article, "Parents with kids are the biggest spenders overall in restaurants." Those families, the article adds, "spent 39 percent more than the national average—\$3,077 per family vs. \$2,211-on food away from home in 2003."
- Some 40 percent of all eating-out dollars are spent by families with children, according to Technomic Inc. research.

That influential group of customers is of immense interest to the restaurant industry. In the past, consumers have paid lipservice to nutritional concerns but have shown little inclination to worry about nutrition while dining out. Is that changing?

So far, anecdotal reports are mixed on whether these healthier alternatives sell well once they're on the menu. Some independents who were praised in Child magazine's April 2004 report on children's dining out options acknowledged leaving low-selling but higher-nutrition items on menus because a small number of customers liked them. And parents who say they are pleased to see apple-

continued on page 20

## Wisconsin kids, Wisconsin restaurants (continued)



Connor



Zachary



Sophie



Raney

kids as soon as you sit down (carrots, celery and dip at Tony Roma's). Having a little snack right away can help a lot."

Lily's mom adds: "I appreciate it when the restaurant is flexible and can work with our requests. I also appreciate it when the wait staff discreetly asks us about dessert or chocolate milk versus regular milk instead of asking Lily directly (of course she wants dessert and chocolate milk—ASAP!)"

**Connor, age 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>** "Connor likes to have something to do while we wait—something as simple as a paper table topper and crayons provides loads of enjoyment. While Connor enjoys the opportunity to color all over the table, my husband and I have the chance to relax and enjoy a glass of wine and appetizer before our meal. And waiting for a table is much easier when a restaurant offers a little snack for kids to tide them over! Another plus is when restaurants offer a second option for kids' desserts, such as fresh fruit instead of only ice cream."

Connor's mom adds, "I prefer to dine at restaurants that offer my son alternatives like fresh fruit or vegetables. Not only is it healthy, but it's something he prefers to eat!"

**Zachary, age 12** "Zachary recommends turkey sandwiches at Cousins Subs, Subway, or Milio's. Post-season celebrations call for Gilles Custard."

**Sophie, age 10** "Sophie's favorite dining spot is The Chancery, which serves pop-sicles with its kids meals, a nice, light dessert. Others high on her list are Denny's, George Webb, and Culver's Frozen Custard."

**Raney, age 8** "Raney recommends John's Sandwich Shop in Wauwatosa, which has great fruit smoothies made with vanilla yogurt, fruit, fruit juice, vanilla soy milk and wheat germ. They also have sweet potato fries with a dipping sauce, which is a nice alternative to regular fries." **WR**

continued from page 18

sauce available on more children's menus recently sheepishly admit ordering the fries anyway.

Still, some things are noticeably changing. Steve Davis, owner of Ardy & Ed's Drive-In, Oshkosh, said that five years ago, he never had requests for milk with a child's meal. Then requests started to come from time to time.

"Our kiddie meals have always come with a beverage, and if anyone asked for milk instead of root beer or soda, it was always, 'Sure, we can do that,'" he said. "But we started seeing a lot of it beginning last year, to the extent that we had to add it to our point of sale system as an option. We still don't sell near as much milk as root beer, but I am amazed every week at the amount. It's happening very, very often."

McDonald's has called its cut apples a "customer favorite" and reported that they and other new menu items are bringing back customers who haven't been in the stores for a long time.

Darden Restaurants' brand marketing director, Jerrold Smith, told *Child* magazine that the snow crab legs "are turning out to be one of the most popular items on the children's menu—they're a lot of fun to eat." Denny's restaurants, whose revamped kids' menus won a national award in Restaurant Hospitality's Best Kids Menus in America competition, reported that after it added higher-nutrition options, 50 percent of sides sold with kids meals were something other than french fries.

### What kids want

With higher-nutrition foods, as with anything you sell to kids, it's all about the packaging and presentation.

"Kids want to play in their food," said Donna Manning, a Madison dietitian and speaker on nutrition issues. "So let's get them to play in their food and eat it at the same time."

Packaging includes both actual packaging (for example, many operators, including Culver's, have scrapped cardboard cartons of milk in favor of plastic containers) and creating an engaging or interactive plate presentation. Manning, who presented "Meeting the Needs of Health-Conscious Customers" at the Wisconsin Restaurant Expo, offered these suggestions on creating kid-friendly plate presentation:



### Right-size your kids' menus

Several restaurants that cater to families are ditching the one-size-fits-all approach to children's menus and creating a "little kids" version and "big kids" version. To anyone who knows the difference between the eating habits of a toddler and a pre-teen, this makes a lot of sense.

One family-style restaurant chain in the Eastern U.S. has tailored a kids' menu for two different age groups: 7 and under, and 8-12. Ruby Tuesday told *Child* magazine it is also looking at a menu tailored to toddlers and preschoolers and a second one for older children: "We're looking to more specifically appeal to kids tastes—we found that 3-year-olds have different favorite foods than 10-year-olds—and to help serve children the proper portion size," said a spokesman. **WR**

- When preparing children's plates, think color and shape: Use cookie cutters to make shapes out of cheese, deli meat, and sandwiches. Offer green ketchup. "Plate presentation is key, and that's something any size operator can do," Manning says.
- Make the items on the plate small enough to not need cutting and to be manageable by little fingers. "What is the first thing a parent does when the plate arrives?" she asks. "Reaches over and cuts the food up. You immediately lost something in the presentation." Cut pita bread sandwiches into quarters. Make mini omelettes.
- Don't make portion sizes overwhelming.
- It almost goes without saying that kids' menu items should never, ever be tagged as "healthy," or "good for you." That's partly because, as Manning stresses, "all foods can fit into a healthy lifestyle," and partly because kids expect healthy foods to taste bad. Manning also suggests posting information about available substitutions and making clear if there is

an additional charge. Don't assume customers are unwilling to pay more to substitute.

- Make food interactive. Give them something to do to it. Anything with dip is big. Or cut up an apple and then "reassemble" it with peanut butter so the child can take it apart.

At the Wisconsin Restaurant Expo in March, "The Interactive Zone," a new event sponsored by Reinhart Foodservice, offered attendees the chance for hands-on learning under a chef's direction. Several sessions featured ideas for kids menu items, including one led by Lynner Taylor of Summit Foodservice.

"The Kids Menu ideas were of great interest to the attendees. I feel most are a bit stymied with regard to the direction one can take to interest kids in something other than pizza of the traditional recipe and nuggets," Taylor said. "We chose a route of 'finger food fondue' with healthy dipping items into yogurt, puddings and dairy as well as non-dairy toppings from Rich Products." **WR**