

## Growing kids meals

Revamped menus and playful promotions aim to strengthen family business **BY BRET THORN**

**R**estaurants are seeing less of their youngest and arguably fussiest customers. Not only are parents taking children out less frequently, but kids themselves say they would rather eat at home, forcing operators to rethink their child-focused offerings.

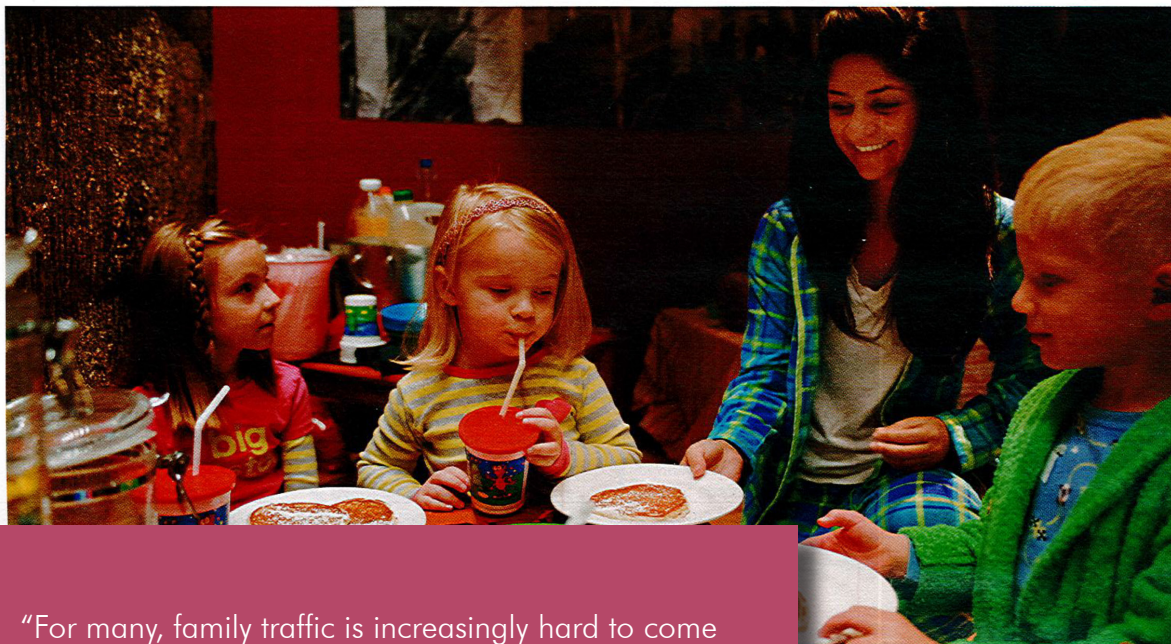
From more healthful fare to programs designed to engage kids in the culinary process, options designed to lure in families are popping up at chain and independent restaurants alike — and working to increase sales and traffic.

“For business it has been tremendous,” Ype von Hengst, executive chef of the 14-unit Silver Diner, previously told *Nation’s Restaurant News* in reference to an overhauled kids’ menu. “We are getting younger families back.”

The Rockville, Md.-based family-dining chain revamped its kids’ menu in April 2012, increasing traffic and improving margins through the addition of such items as teriyaki salmon, brown rice and edamame. Von Hengst developed the menu by bringing in a panel of 31 customers ages 5 to 12 to judge the items. Twenty of those items met the nutritional criteria set by the National Restaurant Association’s Kids LiveWell program — which publicly informs parents of healthy kids’ options at participating restaurants — and all of the entrees come with fruit or vegetables, juice or milk. Soda and fries are only available upon request.

During the menu’s first year, sales of salads jumped 63 percent, strawberry sales doubled, the chain sold 31 percent more vegetable sides, and entrée sales grew by 2 percent, according to von Hengst. At the same time, sales of high-calorie sides are down 45 percent, and soda sales are down 12 percent.

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er study by The NPD Group.

The Port Washington, N.Y.-based consumer research firm reported that, for the year ended June 2013, consumers overall made 7 percent fewer visits than they did five years earlier — 194 instead of 209 — while households with annual incomes below \$45,000 that had kids under 18 visited 16 percent less often — 145 times instead of 173. More affluent families

recent survey of chefs’ trend predictions for 2014 found “healthful kids’ meals” was the fourth most predicted trend. “Children’s nutrition” took seventh place.

Many chains have been working to offer more nutritious meals to their young guests. McDonald’s added apples and shrunk the size of the fries in its Happy Meals back in 2011, and in May

under 9 eating for free. The private dining room is the main dining room.

1 Buckets of offerings of beans, a squeezable applesauce packet and water, for a total of 210 calories.

Burger King, in introducing its lower-fat Satisfries in September, recommended franchisees charge between 20 cents and 30 cents more for them, except in kids’ meals, where officials said the fries should be added free of charge.

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### ing entrées menus

ed on number of items that have percent or more

PERCENT GROWTH (2009 VS. 2013)

	88.0%
Burger	74.8
	42.8
and jelly	33.7
Macaroni and cheese	23.8
Cheese sandwich	14.4
Turkey sandwich	10.7
Miniature corn dogs	10.6
Alfredo pasta	9.8
Waffle	9.2
Teriyaki chicken	8.5
Fish and chips	5.6
Sandwich	5.3

SOURCE: MENUTRENDS DIRECT, DEC. 16, 2013

INSETS: THINKSTOCK

