

## Kids Meals Go Upscale in Quick Service

Younger customers have more adventurous palates than past generations, and limited-service brands are accommodating with more premium kids menus.

### THE REGULAR MENU, PINT-SIZED

“There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to kids menus,” says **Sharon Olson, executive director of Chicago-based food-focused youth marketing research practice Y-Pulse.** “In fact, some of the best things we have seen are from chef-driven, family-casual restaurants that don’t have a dedicated kids menu but have lots of kid-friendly items on the regular menu.”

Some 91 percent of kids surveyed for **Y-Pulse’s 2018 kids dining study** said they like the choices on regular menus, affording operators room to tweak aspects of the adult menu to make them more appealing to young diners. Olson points to Asheville, North Carolina–based Tupelo Honey Café, whose children’s menu comprises smaller portions of adult menu items like house-made black-bean veggie burgers and pulled pork. There’s also a composed “dish” called Color My Plate, in which kids pick three of their favorite vegetables off of the side-dish menu. (After all, 87 percent of kids like restaurants that let them customize their meals, per the Y-Pulse survey.)

Denver-based Mediterranean chain Garbanzo similarly offers smaller portions of regular menu items, like the grilled chicken or steak rice bowl with a choice of nearly 20 veggies, spreads, and sauces, or the half stuffed pita with choice of protein, spreads, veggies, and sauces. The sole child-aimed item is a pita grilled cheese. All options come with sliced apple, organic regular or chocolate whole milk, or soda, with calorie totals ranging from 200 to 575.

The customizable ordering setup both allows parents to teach by example through their own topping choices and empowers kids to create entrées that are just right for them, says marketing director Devin Handler. It even offers refunds for kids who don’t like what they choose.

The brand also encourages curiosity about its healthy Mediterranean ingredients, offering a free falafel to every adult and kid who comes through the doors. “We do that because ‘falafel’ is a scary word,” Handler says. “Watching kids eat falafel for the first time, their eyes light up. Then next time they want it in their entrée. And just like that, we broke through an obstacle to eating healthy. They see that a nutritionally dense food can taste amazing, and that opens the door to hummus, baba ganoush, and tabouli.”

Garbanzo was one of the brands that answered a call from former Panera CEO Ron Shaich, who in 2017 challenged quick-service CEOs to eat from their kids menus for a week, lamenting their lack of nutrient-dense options. (Shaich issued the challenge concurrently with Panera’s announcement that it would start offering kid-sized versions of everything on its regular menu.) Garbanzo CEO James Park and the management team not only ate kids meals from September 24 to 30, but the chain also donated \$1 to a local children’s hospital for every kids meal purchased that week, raising \$1,500. The promotion has since become annual and now takes place for the whole month of September.

“[Shaich] wasn’t really pointing to brands like fast casual, because he knew that was where there were a lot of folks who could make the claim and maybe even make it better,” Handler says. “But we completely commended the idea and initiative.”

## THE PROBLEM WITH DEFAULTS

Even as the country’s four biggest fast-food chains—McDonald’s, Burger King, Wendy’s, and Subway—have replaced soda on kids-meal menus with low-fat milk, water, and 100 percent juice, and even as McDonald’s and Subway have pledged to make fruit and vegetable sides available, that hasn’t necessarily translated to parents purchasing healthier options for their kids more often. This is according to a study by the University of Connecticut’s Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity that documented 800 parents’ purchases at McDonald’s, Burger King, Wendy’s, and Subway for their children through online surveys in 2010, 2013, and 2016.

Between 2010 and 2016, the percentage of parents who bought kids meals with healthier drinks remained roughly the same, at 59–60 percent. From 2013 to 2016, the percentage of parents who purchased kids meals with healthier sides actually declined, from 67 percent in 2013 to 50 percent in 2016. Some of this has to do with inconsistencies in-store; for instance, some locations still automatically include fries or sodas with meals. But it’s also due to incongruence between intention and behavior, since almost all parents surveyed by Rudd said they would buy food for their children at those restaurants more frequently because of the healthy offerings.

And parents are indeed visiting quick-service chains more often. Some 91 percent of those surveyed in 2016 said they had purchased a meal for their child at one of the four largest fast-food chains in the past week, up from 79 percent in 2010. **Interestingly, these results align almost perfectly with a 2017 Y-Pulse kids’ dining survey, in which 92 percent of kids said fast food is their favorite dining experience away from home—up from 70 percent in the 2010 study that asked the same question.**

Recent years have seen the rise of fast-casual chains with healthier takes on fast food aimed at busy millennials, like Boston-based B.Good, which serves burgers, grain bowls, and smoothies featuring seasonal, sustainably sourced ingredients. The brand’s focused kids menu includes local, all-natural chicken sandwiches and beef, turkey, and veggie burgers; grilled cheese on wheat; all-natural hot dogs; and Kale Crush smoothies. Sandwiches come with a choice of regular or sweet potato fries—and, like the rest of the menu, B.Good has scarcely changed these options in the nine years since it debuted a kids menu.

“We have tested different items in the past, such as sliced carrots and broccoli cheddar tots, but in general, our kids offerings have remained consistent because of their proven success,” says executive chef Linh Aven. Today’s parents factor local and sustainable into the wholesome eating equation, she adds. “Few other fast-casual restaurants have strong kids-meal offerings today, and even fewer have options for kids that are well-balanced and sustainably sourced,” she says, noting that the latter half of that equation is a “way of life” for millennials rather than a fleeting trend.