

RESTAURANT

BUSINESS

Feeding Gen Z Kids' menus cater to fussier customers.

May 26, 2014 — If you ask a kid, a restaurant's biggest competition today is not the QSR down the street offering a better toy or the casual place pouring free soft drinks. Many children simply would rather eat at home. In a 2014 survey conducted by Y-Pulse, a youth market research organization, 58 percent of 8- to 13-year-olds said "they love eating at home," second to eating in fast-food restaurants by just five percentage points. Restaurant chains with waiter service got a 56 percent "love it" rating from the 500 kids surveyed, while neighborhood restaurants with waiters received an unimpressive 40 percent.



How can operators get more families in the door? Further survey questions revealed that kids like healthy and customizable menu items. Parents do too. And operators are listening, creating kids' menus that offer more variety, healthier options and a bit of flavor adventure.

Chef-driven, kid-approved

Young guests at PassionFish in Boston, Va., are not an afterthought, says Chef-owner Jeff Tunks. "We're in a very focused effort to give the same attention as the adult menu," he says.

Tunks says one of the top sellers on the menu is "crab meat or vegetables and way sushi" and the idea is to ease kids into a menu of desserts going for \$3 each.

"I have a parent who says their child is a picky eater," says Tunks. "But we have a children's menu that focuses on simple items like chicken fingers and fried shrimp, and we have an arts and craft product that's not worth it, as it attracts families to the restaurant."

Healthy eating, Asian-style

The public has been pushing for healthier kids' menus, and restaurants are getting the message. Austin, Texas-based Mama Fu's Asian House revamped its menu in 2012, adding several new items at all 18 locations.

"Asian cuisine has a healthy halo, so it wasn't a stretch to create healthier kids' dishes," says James Clark, Mama Fu's corporate chef. Many parents were ordering smaller lunch portions for their children's dinners and adding kid-friendly vegetables, so Clark started from there, creating "entry-level" Asian dishes. For the Kids Sweet-n-Sour and the Kids Teriyaki, both featuring chicken, he took the lunch portion and swapped out onions, cabbage and spinach for broccoli and carrots. "We also made the decision to steam the proteins and vegetables instead of stir-frying in oil," he adds.