



Limited-Service, Unlimited Possibilities

Even Kids Want Health

New study shows that children are demanding healthier meals from quick serves



January 2014 — It's no surprise that children love to eat at quick-serve restaurants. But a recent survey by Chicago-based research firm Y-Pulse shows that, beyond a noticeable increase in their favorability ratings for such establishments in the last few years, kids also have higher expectations for the industry, especially when it comes to health and freshness.

For example, many kids want more choices from quick-serve brands. They want to customize their meals and want them to be healthier, according to the study, and they desire increased transparency in the origins of their food.

"It's interesting because they say they want to eat healthier, but they don't mean low-fat or sugar-

free—they mean fresh and homemade," says Sharon Olson, founder of Y-Pulse. "That's a different thing. Dieting is down, and kids aren't interested in eating food that doesn't taste good. To them, healthier is fresh, made to order, isn't sitting around, and tastes authentic and homemade to them. That's healthy. And they're right. By and large, that is healthy."

The Y-Pulse survey, which queried 500 boys and girls nationwide between the ages of eight and 13, found that 63 percent of the kids queried "love" eating at quick-serve establishments, up from 48 percent in 2010, while 26 percent "like" it, up from 22 percent in 2010. Meanwhile, only 1 percent said they "hate" eating at them, down from 9 percent in 2010. Participants said they love tacos and pizza the most.

Olson says fresh and homemade are the two words commonly used when kids refer to high quality. "One of the things they really liked is that they get a healthy way to make their sandwich," Olson says. "It's made to order, made fresh, and customizable. They love their tacos and their pizza. They still like those three pillars of ethnic [food]—Mediterranean, Latin, and Asian—but there's a lot more familiarity with individual cuisines within those. They love chicken, and they like a lot more variations; more ethnic flavors, more bold flavors." "It's interesting because they say they want to eat healthier, but they don't mean low-fat or sugar-free—they mean fresh and homemade."

Several quick-serve chains are actively developing new and healthier kids' meal options. Launched in July 2011, the National Restaurant Association's (NRA) Kids LiveWell program addresses healthy eating for

children and enlists more than 41,000 locations of major quick serves like Burger King, Chick-fil-A, Sonic, Wendy's, and Arby's.

Joy Dubost, director of nutrition for the NRA, says many different restaurants have offered the same kids' meal options over the years, and the Kids LiveWell program has helped increase menu diversification and nutrition consciousness. Dubost says she was impressed that children in the Y-Pulse survey demanded healthier meals.

Kids LiveWell ensures that its participants meet their nutrition criteria, specifically limits on calories, fat, sugar, and salt. "We define a full meal as an entrée, side, and beverage, and in order to be part of that program, you have to meet the criteria that has those limits," Dubost says. "The sodium criteria is 770 mg, which is fairly low for some meals, so that probably took some innovation and retooling of ingredients to ensure that. A lot of restaurants already had options; it was just a matter of identifying them and putting them together."

The NRA's recent annual "What's Hot" culinary forecast, which surveys chefs around the country, found that healthful kids' meals were the No. 4 culinary trend; children's nutrition, meanwhile, landed at No. 7. Healthy kids' meals have been in the top five for the last few years.

"We know that these options are available, and the restaurants are providing even more options on your menu that meet the criteria," Dubost says. "I think that speaks to the demand as well. I do think that things are shifting in that direction and that there have been restaurants that have participated, or there are restaurants that may not be participating but have their own type of program and have been very successful at ensuring that the options are delicious and also appeal to a child."

Fast casuals, in particular, have an opportunity to appeal to children with their customizable model. Salsarita's Fresh Cantina is one such brand with a build-your-own concept, and the chain also offers on the kids' menu six different house-made salsas created from fresh vegetables. Its recently added dessert option is called a poquito, which Tom LaFauci, menu development manager for Salsarita's, calls "our hybrid between a doughnut and a churro. They have the same flavor profile, the cinnamon with the fried dough feel, but it's not fried and it's a lot healthier." He says it has a third less calories than their previous dessert option, a chocolate chip cookie.

"Fresh isn't enough anymore," says Yanira Castro, director of marketing for Salsarita's. "At the very least, your food should be fresh. On top of that it's making stuff in-house—getting full tomatoes, full jalapeños, full red onions, and chopping and making everything in the morning. You can call it handcrafted or house made or homemade—that's the next evolution of fresh.

"This is the year we're going to be looking at different side items for kids, like apples and organic juice," Castro adds. "We're planning to launch a new kids' menu in the middle part of Q2."

The key word here is options, Castro says, and kids want them. "It's the age of customization," she says. "Don't tell me what I'm going to have, I'm going to tell you what I'm going to have."