

## Serving Parent-Approved Desserts Kids Crave

With consumers' interest in health, food labels and ingredient sourcing on the rise, parents are scrutinizing menus at restaurants, seeking to give their children balanced meals that their kids actually want to eat.

In addition to wariness of certain artificial ingredients, the rise in allergies among children is driving more parents to pay attention to where and how restaurants make their offerings, as well as what ingredients and additives they include.

Parents still, however, want to treat their children to delicious desserts, provided they're made with safe ingredients and fit into a well-rounded diet. This presents a huge opportunity for quick-service and fast casual restaurants.



"If you look at some fast-casual chains, their core kids' menu is focused on savory items; you don't see them putting much focus on dessert," says **Sharon Olson, executive director at foodservice research provider Y-Pulse**. "That's taking away the pleasure and indulgence—and you can have those in a reasonable way."

### Sweets Get Clean

To satisfy both label-conscious parents and children's cravings, a number of fast-casual and quick-service restaurants have introduced kid-friendly items with ingredients that get Mom and Dad's approval. They've also stepped up menu transparency. Both moves have the potential to increase customer loyalty and sales: 3 in 5 parents say menu items' health factor is the most important aspect when choosing a restaurant, according to research provider Mintel, and separate research commissioned by public relations agency Ingredient Communications found 44 percent of U.S. consumers would pay at least 75 percent more for food made with ingredients they recognize and trust.

Here are some techniques quick-service and fast-casual eateries are using to strike a balance between the menu criteria parents seek and pleasing younger palates.

### Be Transparent About Ingredients

More than 8 in 10 restaurant operators say their guests pay more attention to food's nutritional content than they did two years ago, according to the National Restaurant Association. And 53 percent of consumers say they regularly eat at restaurants because their food is advertised as being organic, natural or produced without added steroids or hormones, according to a 2016 International Food Information Council Foundation survey.

Some eateries have made that information, as well as ingredient lists, easily accessible online, which can be a huge help for parents trying to choose an option for a child with dietary restriction or for parents concerned with what their child consumes.

For example, fast-casual chain Noodles & Company lists calories and potential allergy risks in its kids' meals descriptions on its website. Visitors can also view the chain's "List of Prohibited Ingredients" and a page on the company's commitment to animal welfare.

“Parents dine at Noodles because they trust the quality of food we serve,” says Danielle Moore, the chain’s communications director. “Transparency is one of our pillars of business.”

### Promote Clean-Label Qualities

From Panera Bread and Chipotle to McDonald’s and Subway, more chains have announced major changes to core menu items to appeal to label-conscious consumers in recent years. Many of these changes have centered on removing artificial components.

“Today’s consumers are increasingly interested in how their food is produced,” says Cindy Goody, PhD, RDN, senior director of nutrition at McDonald’s, which announced last fall its Chicken McNuggets—already made with white meat and no artificial colors and flavors—would also be free of artificial preservatives. “That’s why our U.S. restaurants have committed to make changes to our menu that we’re proud of.”

While entree ingredients, particularly meat, have been a central focus of clean-label efforts in the foodservice industry, reducing the use of artificial ingredients across the menu—including cakes, donuts, brownies and other sweets—can appeal to families buying a quick snack or dessert, and ultimately provide the restaurant a competitive edge.

In addition, highlighting the company’s overarching **commitment to serving clean fare** lets customers know it’s a priority for all food offerings, which can be a more effective way to **build trust** than overloading the menu with isolated references to organic and other claims that may seem unbelievable, according to Olson.

**“Consumers would rather see an honest statement that says, ‘We’re doing this the best we can,’” she says.** “A restaurant might want to say, ‘This is our philosophy and how we created our menu—we try to buy as much sustainable, minimally processed food as we can; and we welcome your comments.’”

### Providing Perfect Portions

Moderation can be another key to creating a dessert menu that resonates with both kids and parents. Hand-held desserts designed for a child’s appetite can fulfill kids’ sweet tooth without serving them an adult-sized portion of sugar. For example, at Noodles & Company, the rice crispy treat side option on the children’s menu is half the size of the regular menu version.

**“Kids love things that are right-sized for them, and those items are small,” Olson says.** “For example, you don’t have to serve 10 to 12 donut holes; you can have a few with a dipping sauce, and it’s fun.”

Today’s parents want to treat their kids to tasty snacks and desserts that are made with safe, recognizable ingredients and fit into a balanced diet. Restaurant chains are poised to capitalize on this opportunity with transparent menus, effective messaging and kid-sized portions.

