

Welcome! Log in / Create an Account

[Subscribe Now](#) | [Media Kit](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [RSS](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Live Chat](#)

EMAIL |

Kids' meals grow stronger

Chains rethink healthfulness of children's menus as focus on nutrition intensifies

March 19, 2012 | By Paul Frumkin

Frank Guidara is energized about a new kids' menu item his chain has in development.

The white whole-grain pizza performed exceptionally well in a blind taste test with children in the Massachusetts school system, and the president and chief executive of Uno Restaurant Group calls it "as healthy as it gets." The pizza almost certainly will be added to Uno's bill of fare in the future.

"We're really excited," said Guidara, a longtime proponent of healthful eating. "We've finally found something healthy that kids like. It will change kids' pizza at Uno."

Just a few years back, it would have been unusual to hear an executive from a major chain get fired up about a menu item for which the chief attractions were that it was healthful and appealed to children. But times have changed, and the importance of kids' menus has grown.

As concerns about the health and wellness of the nation continue to make the news, the foodservice industry has found itself on the frontline of the struggle to transform today's nutritional realities. With childhood obesity rates soaring, restaurateurs are being called upon to take action and help to modify children's eating habits — moving them away from calorie-laden fare that is heavy in fats, sugar and sodium, and steering them toward a more healthful and balanced way of eating.

The days when the kids' menu was created almost as an afterthought and populated by dishes like grilled cheese sandwiches, cheeseburgers and fried chicken tenders are on the wane, experts say. A growing number of operators are investing time, money and resources to develop menu options that are not only nutritionally balanced, but that taste good, as well — a challenge in and of itself, many say.

Last July the National Restaurant Association debuted its Kids LiveWell initiative, a program designed to offer parents and children a wider variety of healthful menu selections when dining out. At the time, 19 chains — among them Au Bon Pain, Burger King, Chili's Grill & Bar, Cracker Barrel Old Country Store and Outback Steakhouse — representing some 15,000 locations signed on. Since then, the number of participating chains and independents has risen to 68 brands and 20,000 locations.

"Everyone is concerned about childhood obesity and how we can address the problem," said Joy Dubost, director of nutrition and healthy living for the National Restaurant Association. "It's about providing options on the menu — it's about enhancing choice and providing variety."

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 17 percent, or 12.5 million, of children and adolescents aged 2 to 19 years are obese — triple the rate from just one generation ago.

Furthermore, nearly one in three children in the United States is either obese or overweight, according to Let's Move, a campaign created in 2010 by first lady Michelle Obama. As a result, one-third of all children born in 2000 or later will suffer from diabetes at some point in their lives, while others will have obesity-related problems like heart disease, high blood pressure and asthma, Let's Move says.

Let's Move seeks to combat childhood obesity by employing comprehensive strategies and mobilizing public- and private-sector resources — including the restaurant industry.

In September, for example, when Darden Restaurants announced it would reduce the amount of calories and sodium in its menu items and provide greater choice and variety in its children's meals, the first lady joined Darden's chief executive Clarence Otis at a news conference, where she called the initiative "a breakthrough moment."

Kids' fare in the crosshairs

There are others, however, who believe the restaurant industry is not moving rapidly enough to combat childhood obesity. Some lawmakers and consumer activists are seeking to hasten changes by taking their complaints to the courts, city halls and statehouses around the country.

Activists for years have maintained that restaurateurs' use of toys in kids' marketing practices lures children into making poor food choices. In an effort to compel fast-feeders in San Francisco to include more healthful fare in their kids' meal packages, city lawmakers last year passed the Healthy Meal Incentive, banning operators from including toys with the meals if they did not meet an obligatory set of nutritional requirements.

But McDonald's and Burger King sidestepped the ordinance by offering the toys separately for 10 cents with the purchase of a kids' meal. McDonald's said it donates the 10 cents to its Ronald McDonald House Charities.

The ban, however, did succeed in sparking copycat measures in New York, Michigan, Nebraska and New York City — all of which have yet to be passed. The New York City ordinance, for instance, would require that establishments offering toys with food ensure the meals are 500 calories or less and have low fat and sodium totals.

By the same token, it also galvanized opponents of such measures to lead pre-emptive strikes in Arizona and Florida, barring cities or counties in both states from attempting to pass bans similar to that of San Francisco.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest also took on toys in Happy Meals when it sued McDonald's in December for deceptive marketing practices that target children. CSPI helped a mother of two from Sacramento, Calif., file a class-action lawsuit charging that McDonald's use of toys for marketing purposes caused her children to request trips to the chain constantly for the Happy Meals, which she claims lack satisfactory nutritional standards. The suit is pending.

"We argued it's deceptive marketing practice to lure kids into a restaurant by dangling a toy in front of them," said CSPI's executive director Michael Jacobson.

McDonald's has not been idle, however. This month, the chain was expected to launch an advertising campaign focusing on its kids' meals and nutritional awareness. McDonald's had earlier retooled its Happy Meal package to include apple slices, fewer French fries and low-fat milk options.

And while CSPI is facing McDonald's in court, Jacobson, a longtime critic of the industry, acknowledges that restaurateurs have made strides on the health front.

"I think there has been some movement in the right direction," he said. "I'm seeing a lot of gradual changes to the food supply. McDonald's has made changes in its Happy Meals. A lot of chains have been adding more fruits and vegetables. Restaurants are beginning to address the use of sodium. And one big problem — trans fats — has pretty much been solved."

Nevertheless, Jacobson says much more can be done.

"There have been some changes, but you have to ask: How permanent are they, and do they go far enough? I don't think they do," he said.

He added that "all restaurants should be coming down on salt, kids should expect to get vegetables instead of French fries, and ... all soft drinks should be removed from children's menus — default beverages should all be healthier."

Recognizing the difficulty of catering to children — particularly when parents don't care about what kids eat — Jacobson said: "There's no magic formula; some things work, others don't. But sometimes you just have to give it to them without talking about it — like cutting salt or offering whole grains."

A happier meal middle

In fact, parents who are indifferent to their children's eating habits can pose a serious obstacle to restaurateurs who exhibit the best of intentions.

"One segment [of the parenting population] doesn't want hassles when they're in restaurants, and they're willing to give in to whatever their kid wants," said Nancy Kruse, president of The Kruse Co. and a Nation's Restaurant News contributor. "And this speaks to a great number of parents."

Uno's Guidara is of the same mind.

"It's an old story, in some respects," said the casual-dining executive. "We've been trying to find the kind of food we can put on menus that kids want and is healthy. And 99 percent of the time, it doesn't work.

"Parents don't want kids making a lot of noise in restaurants, so they let them order what they like — chicken tenders, French fries. It's rarely outside of their comfort zone. We've tried everything over the years. How do we come up with healthier alternatives on things they want?"

The white whole-grain pizza, however, may be a breakthrough for Uno's offerings, said Guidara, a member of the Harvard School of Public Health Nutrition Roundtable, a volunteer group of business leaders, health professionals and citizens that helps to bridge the gap between nutrition research and practice.

"The pizza is very popular with kids," he said.

"It's no surprise that kids opt for the foods they're used to," said Gary Stibel, chief executive of Westport, Conn.-based New England Consulting Group. "We've trained them to want what they want. Do they want fries? Hell, yes! People want what tastes good.

"But behavior can change," he added. "Kids need to be taught a different way of eating."

Still, while parents must shoulder part of the blame, so must restaurateurs, Stibel said.

"Everybody is doing something, but most of what's being done is lip service, not substantive. They're throwing a couple of healthy things like fruit slices or low-fat milk on the menu, but most of it is for show. [That] isn't a bad thing; it's moving in the right direction. But, really, it's only inches in the right direction."

Nevertheless, the NRA's Dubost says more restaurateurs are making a genuine effort to address the problem.

"In 2012 healthful children's meals ranked No. 3 among [the association's] top 20 trends. It's become a topic of serious interest."

Restaurants that sign on to the NRA's Kids LiveWell agree, among other things, to provide one full meal — entrée, side dish and beverage — with 600 calories or less; two servings of fruit, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein and/or low-fat dairy; and limited fat, sugar and sodium. They also must promote or identify the program in some way on the menu or their website.

Tony Roma's, a participant in the Kids LiveWell program, rolled out a new kids menu several weeks ago containing two new items developed to meet its guidelines — a 369-calorie Chicken Taco containing grilled chicken breast, salad mix and a cheese blend; and a 508-calorie Marinara Pasta, with linguine topped with shaved Asiago cheese.

Tony Roma's kids' entrées — all under 600 calories — are served with an appetizer of celery and carrot sticks, a side of Go-Gurt strawberry yogurt, and either broccoli, mashed sweet potatoes or citrus apple salad.

Monique Yeager, director of marketing for Romacorp, said the new selections replace a more routine menu of items like pizza and burgers. The only holdover from the previous kids' menu is a ribs selection, Tony Roma's signature. And while the menu has been in place for only a few weeks, Yeager said anecdotal research shows it has been received positively from guests.

Fast-feeder Chick-fil-A last month augmented its kids' menu by introducing grilled chicken nuggets and applesauce served in a squeezable container, said spokesman Mark Baldwin. The pre-cut chicken for the grilled nuggets is supplied to the restaurants uncooked and pre-marinated. However, unlike Chick-fil-A's original fried version, the nuggets are grilled without any coating or batter, and are gluten-free. Four grilled nuggets served with a fruit cup and 1-percent milk weigh in at 210 calories and three grams of fat. The meal is priced at \$3.15. A meal of six nuggets with sides is priced at \$3.85.

"We're trying to mix convenience with product quality and healthful choices," Baldwin said. "It's tough to eat healthfully on the go. We're trying to strike that balance."

The chain also removed soda from its kids' meal choices, and instead is offering 1-percent milk, apple juice and lemonade.

As part of a comprehensive health and wellness commitment, Darden Restaurants said it would reduce sodium and calories across its menu by 10 percent over the next five years, and 20 percent over the next 10 years, said Rich Jeffers, the casual-dining company's director of media relations and external communications.

The company — which includes Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Capital Grille and Seasons 52 — also established guidelines for its kids' menus, calling for at least one dish that contains fewer than 600 calories and 600 milligrams of sodium.

The new Olive Garden kids' menu, which is expected to be rolled out this summer, highlights dishes that are lowest in fat, calories and sodium.

"Our desire is to give folks a wide variety of options," Jeffers said.

However, some restaurateurs are taking their effort to address the childhood obesity issue a step further and going right to the source. Ype Von Hengst, co-founder of the Silver Diner chain, has devised a marketing promotion whereby kids aged 4 to 12 get to act as restaurant critics and judge new selections before they're included on the menu.

Earlier this month, Von Hengst invited 25 children to come to the Silver Diner in Rockville, Md., to participate in a tasting event and help the chain develop its new kids' menu.

Tony Shure and Colin McCabe, co-founders of the 15-unit Chop't Creative Salad Company, have partnered with the New York-based nonprofit program Wellness in the Schools, or WITS. The chain "adopted" P.S. 175 in New York's Harlem neighborhood, for which the chain supplies a full-time "WITS-in-Residence" chef to prepare fresh meals and helps train the school staff. Shure and McCabe also visit the school personally, where they discuss the importance of healthful eating and other topics.

"This generation of kids is facing obesity problems and childhood diabetes," Shure said. "Their eating habits are being formed now. We want to teach them something that will benefit them for their whole lives.

"In five years, kids' meals will be radically different than they are today."

Contact Paul Frumkin at paul.frumkin@penton.com.

Post a Comment

Related Terms: Operations Marketing Business In Print Print Uno Restaurant Group Company Labor Issues Company Location Contact Details Person Email Address food American cuisine Burger King Center for Science in the Public Interest Chick-fil-A director Donald Knuth Fast food Food and drink Frank Guidara Happy Meal Health Hospitality Human Interest Kids' meal McDonald's Michael F. Jacobson MIX Nutrition Social Issues Technology Trans fat
