



# The toughest of critics

With families eating out of home more often, it's up to the on-trade to vie for the attention of this lucrative market



**A**s more and more families are choosing to eat out of home on a regular basis, children are almost becoming just as important consumers as their parents, influencing a family's decision on where to go.

As we know, in the not so distant past children weren't even allowed in pubs, but as more family-focused outlets grew, so did the importance of catering for children. According to research carried out by HospitalityGEM, children's menus are essential, with 91% of people expecting a dedicated children's menu when eating in a pub.

Appealing to a younger demographic not only benefits parents, but also provides venues with the ideal opportunity to boost their bottom line, so it's important that operators consider all aspects of their children's offering.

"Carefully catering for and keeping children happy within your establishment makes for a more pleasurable dining experience for the whole family," says Scott Duncan, sales director at Carpigiani. "This in itself can help to ensure return visits."

**Mass appeal**

There are several ways in which operators can make their offering more appealing to children and parents, starting with the menu. It doesn't matter whether outlets choose to have a dedicated menu, offer smaller versions of the main menu or both, as long as children are catered for in one way or another.

According to HospitalityGEM, it would seem that parents are divided when ordering for their children, with 52% preferring to choose from a dedicated menu. However, 36% would like the option of having smaller dishes from the regular menu.

"This provides options for those pubs keen to minimise the number of dishes and ingredients used and for those wishing to cater for children in a less overt way," points out Steven Pike, MD of HospitalityGEM.

Although older children want to feel grown up and therefore welcome the option of ordering from the same menu as their parents, younger children relish the thought that they have their own special menu.

From a parent's perspective, it's important that portion sizes and price are appropriate for their children. Parents want value and paying for a meal that they know will be half-eaten is not an appealing prospect.

"It's important to cater for both younger and older children, which is why we have a mini menu aimed at the smaller appetite which

costs less than the kid's menu with slightly larger portions," explains Joseph Winder, assistant manager at Greaves Park in Lancaster. "The kids menu features some items from the adult menu, such as nachos and steak, which are very popular with both children and adults."

When it comes to presentation, it's just as an important part of the experience for children as it is for parents, so it's vital that venues set their offering apart from the rest with crockery and cutlery that's a bit of fun.

"Serve drinks in quirky items such as classic kilner jars and mini milk bottles," suggests Henry Stephenson, managing director at Stephensons. "Children will love the novelty of the unusual presentation whilst parents soak up the nostalgia and appreciate the trendy vintage style of the items."

It's important that the menus not only entice children with the choice of dishes, but are appealing to the eyes too. Bright colours and interesting characters will not only garner interest from the younger guests, but can also serve as a great distraction.

"We are passionate about children's menus," says Jamie Kimpton, Star Pubs & Bars licensee at the Pollards in Willaston. "We print our own menus and encourage the children to colour them in."

Providing children with activities to keep them busy at the table while they are waiting for food is a huge advantage for parents keen to relax and, if successful, will be a major draw when deciding where to eat out in the future.

Many suppliers now offer help with the design of children's menus – offering helpful hints and advice for a successful end product. From branding to point-of-sale material, there's a lot operators can do to capture children's imaginations.

"This design element can also be applied to other menus and marketing material," explains Christina Veal, director at New Forest Ice Cream. "Adding a touch of quality to a bespoke dessert menu or creating table cards to promote a particular offer or product."

**Recommendations**

These days children's menus have evolved beyond chicken nuggets, chips and beans. However, these types of dishes remain popular with younger consumers, but are now of a much higher quality.

"Old faithfuls such as pasta, mini burgers

and fish goujons fly out the door," explains Brendan Padfield, owner of The Unruly Pig in Bromeswell, Suffolk. "Fresh juices and cordials go down a storm too."

According to new research by OpenTable, 76% of British parents reveal that their children

are more adventurous than they were – preferring adult's menus. The survey also discovered that children's palates are more sophisticated these days, with 24% of children

having tried sushi and 21% lobster.

"With gourmet food becoming more and more accessible across the UK, it is no surprise to discover that British kids are now increasingly opting for dishes off the adult menu," says Mike Xenakis, managing director at OpenTable. "As a father of two, I have noticed first-hand that kids are becoming more adventurous than ever before when it comes to dining, and with the food on British menus now of such a diverse variety it's clear to see why."

Aside from the popular classics, children are now exposed to a variety of food trends in school, at home and on the high street, so it's important that the on-trade takes note.

"The most popular items on the menu are nachos and tortillas," says Winder. "Both bring a fun element to eating as kids can use their hands and the tortillas give them the choice as they can decide what to fill them with."

This generation of children have moved with the times, preferring spicier flavours than their predecessors, so it's not surprising that Mexican and Indian dishes are proving popular on menus.

"Just seeing how school food has changed over recent years shows how widely accepted these foods are by children, with dishes such as Cajun fish and spicy barbecue chicken now mainstream options," says Frannie Santos-Mawdsley, senior customer marketing manager, European foodservice at Moy Park. "Sides include an array of spices too, with dishes such as piri piri chicken, sweet potato wedges and flavoured rice being commonplace items."

Italian food remains a staple part of Brits' diets and offers consumers value for money and operators a decent margin too. Pizza is one of the most popular Italian dishes with children and operators can take full advantage of this with a build your own pizza concept.

"Pizza can add a real point of difference, while still encouraging the healthy option," says Jessica Lalor, brand development manager ➔

**"Kids are now increasingly opting for dishes off the adult menu"**

**Facts**

Research by Aviko shows that families remain very price sensitive, with

**67%** of respondents admitting it's a key motivator in choosing where to eat.

Aviko also found that the variety of food on offer is also important to consumers with

**65%** of consumers stating that the menu options available influence where they dine out.

According to Almondy,

**68%**

of consumers would choose a cake that's topped with a confectionary brand. It also found that customers are 22% more likely to eat sweet treats when dining with children (Toluna 2014).

## CHILDREN'S MENUS

for Kerrymaid. "Children will love getting involved in the ordering process and having the freedom to design their own meal to suit their specific tastes and preferences."

Sides are just as important as the main dishes, so it's important to offer a variety of healthy options. However, parents are generally more relaxed about what their children are eating when out of home and expect to see classic favourites like chips on the menu.

"Chips are the side of choice on children's menus," says Mohammed Essa, general manager UK and Ireland at Aviko. "With fries remaining the hero of children's menus, it's important to make the most of this demand. There's a real opportunity for operators to maximise profits by offering fries with an irresistible point of difference that helps them stand out from the crowd."

For children, desserts can be more important than the main meal, so offering the right dishes is vital. Ice cream is synonymous with children and something that shouldn't be neglected on menus. Not only is it a popular choice, but it also offers good profit margins too.

"Ice cream should play a key role in a children's dessert menu," says Veal. "Use as a standalone dessert, either in scoop, single portion tub or as an accompaniment to another dessert, while wrapped lollies can be used to further the variety available."

With a virtually endless array of flavours, ice cream is the ideal dessert option for kids. It's important to offer the traditional favourites – chocolate, vanilla and strawberry – but operators should create interest with more unusual flavours such as bubble gum and Jaffa Cake too.

Operators can further add to children's fun by offering a self-serve ice cream station. This will

appeal to children of all ages keen to create their very own desserts using a range of sweets and flavoured sauces.

"With large capacities and continuous production, operators can meet demand even during peak times without keeping customers waiting," explains Duncan.

When creating children's menus operators need to ensure that the meal descriptions are as exciting as possible. This can easily be achieved by using fun descriptions and entertaining images.

Staying on the interactive theme, pubs can further engage with their young customers by encouraging them to get interactive with their food by allowing them to customise their own sweet pizzas.

"A twist on the savoury pizza is to offer a sweet pizza as a dessert (adult share size portion, slices or kids portions) – with melted chocolate or chocolate spread on the base, topped with toasted marshmallows, fresh strawberry slices and white chocolate buttons," suggests Sandro Bevilacqua, vice chairman of Continental Quattro Stagioni.

Drinks are important to children too, so offering a variety is key. From squash and water to milk and smoothies, both children and parents are looking for something exciting and familiar.

"Alongside cola and carbonates, children will look for kids drinks they know and love, so don't forget to include these in your range," says Russell Kirkham, senior shopper marketing manager – out of home, Britvic. "Consider

offers and promotions on 'no added sugar' products to appeal to parents buying for their children, and highlight alongside children's meals on the menu."

Offering a diverse children's menu made up of the right elements that are exciting as well as good value for money will mean satisfied

customers. However, going the extra mile to ensure children are entertained so their parents can relax will ensure repeat visits time and again.

"Catering for kids can be a challenge, as they are considered

the toughest of critics," concludes Andrew Ely, managing director of Almondsy. "Operators need to find a balance between dishes that appeal to kids but also present parents with quality and value for money when eating out." ■

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### Top tips

- **Safety first** – "Whilst serving food on hot plates is great for adults, it's not so clever for children, for whom cold plates are much more suitable," points out Zoe Gill, food and business development chef at Brakes.
- **Perfect balance** – "Teaming more adventurous meals with familiar potato side dishes, like mash, jacket potatoes or roasties will make dishes more accessible to children," says Marie Medhurst, sales director for Bannisters' Farm. "To be more adventurous, try swapping chips for skins, dippers or longboats."
- **Size matters** – "Children often feel overwhelmed if they are served large portions and don't finish what's on their plate, which is seen as a waste by parents," says Gill. "Serve smaller portions to avoid wastage and give children a sense of achievement when they finish their meal."
- **Expand culinary horizons** – "A tasting menu sized for children could provide a nutritionally balanced offering in a more fun and exciting way and act as an opportunity for children to experience new tastes and textures," says Richard Jansen, managing director of Pan'Artisan. "With the widespread popularity of sharing plates and platters, this could also present an occasion for the whole family to share a meal together."
- **Be flexible** – "Mix and matching is a great idea," says Luke Davies, food strategy and implementation manager at Star Pubs & Bars. "Allow the kids to choose their preferred protein, carb and veg option."

Sausage, potato and peas from Bannisters' Farm

