

Gastro

Creating a children's menu that satisfies young appetites, while keeping mum and dad happy that their cherubs are eating a balanced diet, can be tough. But the experts have a few ideas

ANDREW DON REPORTS



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Jamie Oliver is widely lauded for his ongoing work in improving children's diets. His Food Revolution website, launched this summer, encourages parents and teachers to discuss food issues with children and focuses on the millions of children who eat too much of the 'wrong' foods.

Gareth Longhurst, chef at gastropub the Navigator, in Swanwick, Hampshire, part of Upham Pub Group, says Oliver is the best in the industry. "He has certainly opened everyone's eyes to what we feed kids today, while offering fun and interesting alternatives."

The pub industry has a fine balance to strike between getting young gastric juices flowing without alienating mums and dads who do not wish to shop for plus-size clothes for their little angels.

Mitchells & Butlers (M&B) tries to do this across its brands by offering kids' firm favourites as choices on its menus, such as 100% beefburgers, whole chicken breast nuggets, rotisserie chicken, grilled fish and vegetarian dishes, and offering mum and dad the opportunity to add healthier accompaniments such as rice, jacket potato, fresh vegetables and, in its Harvester venues, a salad bar that is offered free with every main meal.

David Gallacher, M&B director of food trading, says the group dedicates a large percentage of its food development and company nutritionist time on getting its children's menus right.

It carries out regular research to

ensure it delivers what children and parents "want and need", he says.

A survey by online reservations company OpenTable carried out last year among 2,000 UK residents found:

- 80% of children prefer to order food from the adult menu
- Children are dining out more than twice a month with an average spend of £12.43
- Almost a quarter have eaten sushi, almost a fifth have eaten lobster, 14% soufflé, 18% venison and 19% squid, suggesting children in the UK are developing more sophisticated palates

However, there is no shortage of pubs that pay scant regard to children's health and still serve products reminiscent of Bernard Matthews' Turkey Twizzlers that Oliver so famously slated.

Nina Grosicka, group account acquisitions manager and nutritionist at JJ Foodservice, says "the usual suspects", such as burgers, chips and sugary drinks still dominate children's menus in most pubs.

"Wherever you turn, there are the same fried, bland and watered-down versions of popular dishes, which most adults would be unlikely to try them-



Allowing children to eat the same food as adults, but in smaller portions, would be brilliant

selves. Pubs and restaurants seem to choose the easier and cheaper food options for kids, which limit the dishes to a bare minimum, when I think that simply allowing children to eat the same food as adults, but in smaller portion sizes, would do brilliantly well."

Foodservice wholesaler KFF, says children's menus have historically been an afterthought for pubs, but Tony Blake, the company's development chef, says that children's food offerings have had to be taken seriously, with the rise of the gastropub sector and with family dining now considered a key demographic.

Rob and Lucy Brewer, who run St Austell's Rashleigh Arms, Cornwall, say that while ubiquitous dishes such as burgers, chicken nuggets and pizza are still common in pubs, the frozen/processed versions are less so.

The Brewers say that although some of the options present themselves as being unhealthy "we make most of the meals on site, so there are chicken goujons, but they're made with real chicken breast. Burgers are on the menu but they are home-made and the bread is locally baked."

KFF's Blake has noticed an increasing number of its pub customers moving away from a dedicated children's menu and instead offering smaller versions of dishes from the regular menu.

"This is ideal for chefs because ►►

TOP TIPS FOR PLEASING CHILDREN AND PARENTS

- Offer children the choice of a dedicated menu or smaller portions from the adult menu
- Offer alternatives to processed foods and, where possible, opt for home-made food and with ingredients you would want to feed your own children
- Treats, such as chips and onion rings, are fine as long as they are balanced with other options. Try serving fish, chicken or onion rings in breadcrumbs rather than deep-fried batter
- Ensure you have vegetarian/vegan/organic options and food suitable for children with intolerances
- Make sure smaller portions are appropriately priced
- Provide activity packs to keep children absorbed during their visit
- Ian Moss, head chef at gastropub the Three Fishes, in Mitton, Lancashire, says: "Make it exciting and make sure the kids get something they want and something their parents would want to give them."
- Children of different ages have different requirements. Harvester splits its kids' menu into three sections: Small Bites, aimed at under-fives; Bigger Appetites, for five years and older; and the Harvester Recommends section – smaller portions of its adult mains
- Give staff specific training on making children feel welcome



Recipe card

Grilled chicken/turkey burgers

INGREDIENTS:

450g minced chicken
1 avocado
1 garlic clove
1 jalapeno pepper (optional)
75g quinoa
¼ tsp pepper
½ tsp salt
4 burger buns

METHOD:

Add all ingredients to a large mixing bowl and toss gently. Shape into desired size patties and grill for approximately 7-8 mins, turning the burgers half way through the cooking time (can also be oven baked).

FINANCES:

Total cost to make: £1.38pp

RRP: £3

Margin: 118%



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they no longer need to order specific items for a completely different menu that often proves costly to maintain. Instead they can just prep smaller items or offer half as much," he says.

Meatcure, a small restaurant group – which last month launched a crowd-funding round on Seedrs for five more venues – says that many big brands and small independents that have tried to introduce healthier options have found children do not want to eat them and the parents do not want

the battle they endure daily at home.

Rob Martyniak, co-founder, says: "After all, they go to a restaurant to unwind, for convenience or for an experience – not a repeat performance of last night's tantrum around the dining room table. Therefore it's easy and affordable for brands to buy processed frozen products to accompany adults' menus.

Martyniak says he does not think children's menus are ever given enough thought. "Or it's straight back to profit margins and making a quick buck.



HAPPY MEALS

if kids enjoy eating at your pub, parents will too



Recipe card

Baked chicken nuggets in quinoa crumbs

INGREDIENTS:

3 chicken breasts
⅔ cup flour
1 tsp salt
¼ tsp pepper
3 eggs
450g cooked quinoa



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METHOD:

Preheat oven to 425°F (220°C). In small bowl mix flour, salt and pepper; in a separate bowl whisk eggs. Place quinoa in a third bowl. Cut chicken fillets into smaller pieces, coat them in flour mixture, then egg, and lastly in quinoa and place on ovenproof dish/tray. Bake for 15-20 mins. Serve with dipping sauces (barbecue, ketchup, sweet & sour).

FINANCES:

Total cost to make: £1.55pp

RRP: £3.25

Margin: 110%

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Some big faceless brands will not take the hit and try to build a loyal customer base

"Unlike us, some small independent and most big faceless brands are not willing to take a hit on it and to persevere with building a loyal customer base that sees revenue return in other ways."

Meatcure uses prime cuts in its beef patties, not binders and "no added rubbish" and it says it does not do anything different for children.

"We simply break a patty in half, press on the griddle and cook. We serve fresh chicken breast in our house southern style rub, and a beech wood-smoked pork frank for the [hot] dog.

"For tots, we offer meatballs rolled from our beef patties, white fish in a very light batter and mac & cheese, which we make ourselves, all with fruit and vegetable crudites," says Martyniak.

It pays to get it right: the Brewers estimate children account for about 10% of total food revenue through UK pubs, based on their Rashleigh Arms site.

But KFF's Blake claims children are the real decision makers in the choice of pub dining locations and they will be vocal about their dislike if they do not enjoy the menu.

"A happy child always means a great meal for the parents. If they don't have to worry about what their child is being served, they will be able to relax and enjoy the experience more," he says. ■

OPENTABLE SURVEY



80%

OF CHILDREN
PREFER TO
ORDER FROM
ADULT MENU

£12.43

THE AVERAGE
SPEND ON
CHILDREN
DINING OUT
MORE THAN
TWICE A MONTH

Source:
OpenTable
carried out last
year among
2,000 UK
residents



Recipe card

Gluten-free cheese and tomato quinoa crust pizza OR garlic bread

INGREDIENTS:

½ tsp dry oregano
2 eggs
225g quinoa
235ml water
½ tsp baking powder
1½ tsp garlic salt
3 tsp olive oil
55g mozzarella
75g pizza sauce (if making pizza)
115g grated cheese



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METHOD:

Rinse the quinoa and cook it. In a bowl, whisk the eggs, olive oil, garlic salt, oregano, basil and baking powder. Add the quinoa to the mixture, add cheese and stir to combine. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper and spray it with cooking spray. Pour the dough onto the parchment and spread it to an even ¼-inch layer. Form it into a circle for pizza crust or rectangle for garlic bread. Bake for 18-20min. If you are making pizza, spread a little pizza sauce and add toppings of your choice after the crust is cooked and place it in the oven for further five minutes.

FINANCES:

Total cost to make: £1.17pp
RRP: £2.80
Margin: 140%

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Recipe card

Healthy banana split

INGREDIENTS:

1 banana
2 strawberries
4 tsp reduced-fat thick yogurt
Small drizzle chocolate

METHOD:

Cut the banana down the middle, fill with plain or vanilla-flavoured yoghurt, add strawberries sliced in half and drizzle with chocolate sauce.

FINANCES:

Total cost to make: £0.35pp
RRP: £0.75
Margin: 110%



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