

BIG CHOICES

FOR

Little Diners



Creative and visually appealing plates will capture young diners' imaginations



If you're looking to attract families this summer, a sensational kids' menu packed full of tempting dishes is key. Read on to discover how to create the ultimate fun-filled feast for little foodies...

The school holidays are just around the corner and many families are busy filling up the roof box, stocking up on sun cream and scheduling days out to build those summer memories. As soon as the schools break up, restaurants, cafés, hotels and pubs all across the country prepare for an influx of young visitors and their families, seeking refreshment on their adventures.

However, catering for children these days is not quite as straightforward as plating up some chicken nuggets and chips. Modern parents and carers are on the hunt for exciting, diverse menus to expand their mini diners' palettes, as well as options that suit a range of dietary requirements, plus lots of added nutritional value. And, it's not just about the food either; making young patrons feel welcome with appropriate facilities, thoughtful details and a family-friendly feel is key to keeping them coming back to you for seconds (and thirds).

FUN WITH FOOD

As every chef knows, "we eat first with our eyes" and that is especially true when it comes to children. The way a meal looks can make the difference between a child's complete enthusiasm or total aversion towards it. Consider if there's anything you can do to make miniature meals more appealing to young eyes. Experiment with different crockery, cut food into playful shapes, create a smiley face from veg and play with layering and textures. Sometimes a name change can make all the difference too; bye bye boring fruit salad – hello, fruit kebabs!

That said, it's advisable to skip the addition of too many fiddly bits and the usual sprinkle of herbs. Too many unfamiliar elements can be overwhelming for pint-sized diners.

TURNING TABLES

One of the major stress factors for parents when eating out is keeping their children entertained at the table while they wait

for their food. Offer parents and kids a real-life alternative to phones and tablets by giving them a helping hand. A paper kids' menu with some food-related puzzles and activities, plus a pot of wax crayons is endlessly effective. Offer families the option to have their kids' food first so they don't get hangry, or include a small healthy starter – such as veg sticks and hummus – as standard.

THE (MILD) SPICE OF LIFE

While simple dishes like beans on toast still delight many kids, today's parents are eager to broaden their children's culinary horizons. Fussy eaters continue to reign supreme, but parents want to challenge and encourage little ones to try new things. To keep up with competitors and appeal to modern families, menus need to offer diverse dishes with fun flavours and a big dollop of nutrition.

Take inspiration from menus around the world and mix a mini poké bowl, mild curry or taco dish with the ▶



Pexels - Anastasia Krylova

Dishes need to expand tiny taste buds to keep up with modern parents

usual pasta and pizza favourites to develop tiny palates. Or, offer small portions of adult dishes as a simple way to expand your menu for young diners (and make them feel more grown up too).

To give your kids' menu a nutritional boost start by subbing white starchy foods for their brown counterparts and offer a colourful variety of vegetables on the side. As the demand for plant-based dishes grows across the board, adding a selection of vegetarian and vegan menu items for little ones is essential, too.

DRINK UP!

When catering for kids, it's easy to get carried away with the food, but drinks are an equally important part of your offering, plus they can add nutritional value to your meals and showcase your creativity.

Smoothies and blended fruit juices are a fun and colourful way to serve up fruit and veg and offer more interest than squash. Similarly, popping a babycino on the menu makes little ones feel more sophisticated and looked after. Remember that spills happen (a lot), so consider cups with lids and straws, too.

ALLERGY AWARE

Of course, clearly highlighting allergens is common practice in the hospitality

sector, but be aware that, for parents, eating out with a child who has allergies can be a major source of anxiety.

Being allergy aware and signposting dishes clearly on the menu and on the packaging of to-go food – or having a separate menu entirely – is key to reassuring customers that you take allergies seriously. Ensuring serving staff check for allergies when taking orders will also help to reinforce this message.

MORE THAN A MENU

When choosing a spot for lunch, many families, and especially those with young children, will be looking at more than just the food on offer. They will be considering if there's space for their buggy, plenty of highchairs so they don't have to balance a baby on their lap, kids' cutlery, facilities to warm up baby food and changing tables (ideally, not just in the ladies' loos). Think about how well-trained your staff are for little customers; make sure they know never to put hot drinks down in front of children, and skip the hot plates for them, too.

More than anything, these gestures signal to parents and their children that they are welcome in the space and this will instantly make everyone feel cared for and allow them to relax. ■



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Jane Limage, Catering Manager at Lee Chapel Primary School in Basildon has been providing nutritious meals for children for over 20 years. Here's how she caters to the industry's most discerning diners...

NUTRITION IS KEY

You've got to try and get as much nutrition into children as you can with pasta, grains, vegetables and fruits. We always have a salad cart, which gives kids a full choice of vibrant, pre-prepared vegetables, such as thinly-sliced peppers, grated carrot, homemade coleslaw, crunchy cucumber and bright sweetcorn. We always make sure there's a fish option too, like fish fingers or tuna.

HIDDEN VEG

Children don't tend to want to eat a huge amount of veg so we've found some ways of incorporating it into the meals. We mash carrots into our tomato sauces as it blends in and sweetens. We add beans and pulses where we can, such as kidney beans in the chilli and chickpeas in the veggie curry.

CROWD PLEASERS

What dishes do children love? Pasta, pasta, pasta. Even though children are more selective about what they eat now, pasta dishes *always* go down well and you can add a lot of variety with pasta shapes and sauces.

INVOLVED EATERS

I'm pleasantly surprised by how much children want to be involved in their food. We have a children-led parliament where they discuss the menu and provide feedback. They take a lot of interest in their own nutrition and what they're eating.