

Smart retailers are bringing in families with compelling kids' meals

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Healthy kids' meals ranked No. 4 in the National Restaurant Association's "What's Hot 2015 Culinary Forecast," a survey of nearly 1,300 professional chefs. Also on the list were whole-grain items in kids' meals (No. 14) and fruit/vegetable children's sides (No. 19).

But are convenience store-operators taking any notice?

Rutter's Farm Stores is. For the past three years, the 60-location, York, Pa.-based chain has been offering kids' meals, including sliders, hot dogs and grilled cheese for \$3.29. Healthy sides are on the docket alongside more traditional offerings: Milk and juice are available, along with fountain beverages, and children can pick a piece of whole fruit (apple, banana or orange) instead of fries or mac and cheese bites. These meals were added to Rutter's foodservice lineup as a way to drive parents into the chain's stores. The idea, says vice president of foodservice Jerry Weiner, was that parents would pick up something for their kids, and perhaps they'd grab something for themselves at the same time. It was important to feature healthier sides, Weiner says, to make the meals appealing to moms, typically the parent responsible for their kids' meals. He also decided to offer grilled cheese with or without crusts, which, he says, "doesn't make a big difference operationally, but to moms, it's a big deal."

This is right on track, says Donna Hood Crecca, senior director of Chicago-based research firm Technomic Inc. "Anything that can help [today's busy mom] find a healthy, quality, affordable, easy and convenient solution to feed her kids is a good thing," she says.

Rutter's options for kids reflect what's happening across the industry. You can recite most restaurants' kids' menus in your sleep—mac and cheese, cheese pizza, chicken fingers—though many now come with better-for-you sides and drinks, such as apple slices, carrot sticks or milk.

Beyond the execution, there was another essential factor of these kids' meals: Weiner wanted consumers to see the food heated and assembled so they'd know it's freshly prepared. "If you're trying to make the case of fresh, you can't just say it; you have to show it," he points out.

Kids' meals, says Crecca of Technomic, "have got to be done right. They've got to have health and freshness attributes and the overall foodservice offering has to be spotlessly clean."

One thing that can go a long way toward reinforcing the "fresh" message, says New York restaurant consultant Arlene Spiegel, is using clear packaging so consumers can see what's in kids' meals if they're preprepared. It's also a good idea to date packages, she says, to emphasize freshness. ●

Millennial Parents in the Kitchen

64%



Percent who report cooking most meals at home, compared to 80% of Gen-X parents and 85% of boomer parents.

Percent who report taking their kids out to a restaurant at least once a week, vs. 58% of Gen-X parents and 57% of boomer parents.

53%



Percent who order takeout or delivery for their kids at least two to three times a week, vs. 29% of Gen-X parents and 15% of boomer parents.

Percent who say their children "have to try new foods; don't give them an option," vs. 10% of parents from all age groups.

Source: Datassential/CIA Healthy Kids

