

IS IT TIME TO CHANGE MENU FOCUS

It's a common scene, even in Boston's upscale restaurants: While Mommy and Daddy dine on braised short ribs and big glasses of red wine, their son or daughter noshes on chicken nuggets with a side of plain pasta. Today's parents have been conditioned not to expect much from children's menus.

"I would be thrilled to find some healthy options for Eva," says Jessica Redmond, 35, a Newton resident whose 21-month-old daughter has sophisticated tastes. "She never, ever eats things like chicken fingers and I would like to support that both at home and out. I think kids' palates can be far more sophisticated than most restaurants give credit for and it's a shame to limit them to 'kid food.' "

Those sentiments are shared by a growing number of parents and health professionals. Most kids' menus are filled with fat and sodium and have a limited selection. While many parents say their children will only eat what most think of as typical kid chow, it has become somewhat of a vicious cycle: Kids are told that this is "their food," so it is difficult to expect them to be more adventurous and try other foods.

Some area restaurants are starting to catch on. Ming Tsai of Wellesley's Blue Ginger knows from his own experience that many children do have bold tastes. He has created a menu for his young patrons with dishes that have real flavor. "I have kids and I cook for them so I know what they like to eat and it's not bland food," says the chef. "Everything I cook for them starts with a combination of garlic, shallots, and onions in oil." His Shanghai noodles and vegetables in a ginger-soy sauce and grilled steak with mashed potato and vegetables are two menu items that kids might enjoy.

The South End's Banq also uses aromatics to entice young guests. While Banq doesn't have an official kids' menu, it does have a list of items such as short rib with kaffir lime baked potato or mussels with steamed spinach that the kitchen will make in a kid-friendly portion. Stephanie's on Newbury Street also lacks a formal children's menu, but offers several of its dishes, like sweet-potato ravioli, in kid-size servings.

Hotels are a good place to find restaurants with interesting menus because they tend to cater to families. Chef Rachel Klein of the Seaport Hotel's Aura created a menu that extends to the littlest of diners, with a selection of fruit and vegetable purees including rutabaga and Bartlett pear. She'll also make orange-glazed chicken tenders. Klein, who is a mom, says "I have a multicultural view on food. I didn't want my son just eating grilled cheese. I want parents to understand there are other things to make that are just as easy but are also healthy."

At Turner Fisheries in Westin Copley Place, little ones can sample baked cod with rice and green beans free before 7 p.m. with an adult ordering an entree. The Liberty Hotel's Clink offers seafood-loving kids five potato-wrapped shrimp with sweet chili sauce or pretzel bites with salami and cheese.

Klein's homemade chicken tenders with its orange-juice and brown sugar coating is an upscale version of a popular children's dish that often comes frozen. But never fear, chicken fingers aren't disappearing from eateries. Tsai's menu also features them. His are panko-crusted with a little spice. "No one assumes kids have a worse palate," says Tsai. "In fact, sometimes they have a better one than adults." ■