

## Drawing families with innovative children's menus

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### Where Kids Count



Microwaved pizza, mac and cheese and chicken fingers are often standard pizzeria children's menu fare. But to keep kids -- and their families -- coming back, many pizzerias are also offering creative, healthy and allergy-conscious menus.

Fresh Brothers, a Los Angeles-based multi-unit operation, designed a four-item kids' menu featuring their top-selling Fresh Kids Special Pizza, where the sauce contains ground vegetables.

"The Fresh Kids Special is probably the healthiest thing on that kids' menu," says the co-founder and chief marketing officer of Fresh Brothers, Debt Goldberg. "And then when you pair it with our mega grain pizza, which is 50-percent whole wheat, it's a slam dunk."

For \$4.95, kids can also try the all-white meat chicken bites or mozzarella sticks, both served with carrots and celery or fries or they can opt for the cheese pizza for \$5.25.

"From my point of view, the simpler the better for kids -- it's a rare kid that loves a heavy pizza or something with a lot of sauce," says Goldberg.

Fresh Brothers also emphasizes choice -- it's a nut-free restaurant offering vegan and gluten-free options.

"It's been life changing for families because there aren't a lot of places that do it and do it with the protocols we use from the National Foundation for Celiac Awareness," explains Goldberg. "So it makes dining with food allergies more accessible and fun because all kids want to be able to eat pizza."

Word of mouth helps Fresh Brothers market in communities where they're established, but, in new areas, they describe the Fresh Kids Special to customers at the register and ask if they'd like to try it.

Further marketing for the pizzeria includes social media campaigns and partnering with organizations like their local American Youth Soccer Organization -- they dole out free seven-inch pizza coupons and promote Fresh Brothers' offerings for children, including their make-your-own pizza parties.

And, on the menu, the Fresh Kids Special is listed in both the specialty pizza and kids' menu sections, making it highly visible to guests.

At Stix & Stones Wood Fired Pizza, a Neapolitan pizzeria operating in Chicago, the kids' top seller is the cheese pizza, but they also offer kids the option of adding two toppings including honey, farm fresh egg, meatball and sausage.

The dough for the kids' pizza is hand stretched and a layer of sauce, comprised of strained sweet San Marzano tomato and a touch of olive oil and sea salt, is added. It's topped with mozzarella cheese made daily in house.

"We incorporate a little bit of Parmesan cheese (with the mozzarella) which kids seem to have a real affinity for," says Jeremy Samatas, owner of Stix & Stones.

The pizza is served on a kids-size pizza paddle along with a nut-free homemade chocolate chip and M&M cookie.

For \$6.50 each, the kids' menu also features a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on fresh Hawaiian bread with grapes; turkey and fresh mozzarella, mini penne pasta with marinara and a meatball sandwich. Each meal includes a carrot and dip appetizer along with a drink and cookie.

To attract families, Stix & Stones promotes its Sunday family supper, marketing it as reminiscent of a traditional Italian family gathering. In the past, they've offered a bundle of a Stix Salad and 12-inch pizza for \$12 on these evenings.

They favor Instagram for social media marketing and keep customers abreast of events via an e-mail database.

Since the pizzeria is located in an outdoor mall, they also market by partnering with neighborhood businesses. For example, when a nearby store offers an activity, or the mall holds their "Jingle Mingle", Stix & Stones suggests, either through e-mail or their partners' Web sites, that kids eat at the pizzeria after (or before) the event.



While the Neapolitan pizza Stix & Stones specializes in is still new to many palates, and may be especially unfamiliar-looking to kids, many children are receptive after they taste it.

"We've got a ton of new fans with the kids coming in," says Samatas.

Meanwhile, at Picasso in the resort town of Stowe, Vermont, kids have an extensive menu to choose from. Their pasta is a top seller, with most sales coming from spaghetti, penne or fettuccini with butter. Others try the pasta with marinara, pesto cream — with nut-free pesto, heavy cream and penne noodles — or Alfredo sauce.

Another best seller is the kids' pizza, which comes with cheese and one topping of the child's choice — often pepperoni.

The kids' menu also includes items like a mixed green salad for \$4 (and an add-on of all-natural grilled chicken for \$3), a local all-natural grass-fed 6 ounce beef hamburger or cheeseburger, with hand cut fries, side salad or steamed broccoli for \$6.50, and house-made lemon-garlic hummus with vegetables for \$5.

At intervals throughout the year, George Spraker, Picasso's GM, says they promote the kids' menu through offering free pizza or pasta nights, which reminds guests of their kids' menu, and shows gratitude to the local community for sustaining them during the resort's off-season.

Besides the menu, attractions for kids at Picasso include a small arcade, oversized neon-colored crayons and coloring page. Due to its kid-friendly environment and menu, kids on vacation often frequent the restaurant with their parents during their stay.

"If you're operating a place that makes kids happy when they come there, I think it really creates a no-brainer decision for the parents," expresses Spraker.

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