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Understanding Tomorrow's Tastemakers Today



By Patricia L. Fitzgerald

» Research on the dining influences and preferences of K-12 students can help drive menu magic in your school nutrition program.

School Menu Concepts

10 menu concepts designed to meet school meal requirements created by chefs and dietitians and photographed professionally were tested with both **adults and kids**.

			
Spaghetti with Korean Meatballs	Apple Kale Salad	Buddha Bowl	Banana Berry Smoothie
			
Overnight Oatmeal	Tex-Mex Breakfast Bowl	Mexican Tostada	Grilled Cheese & Roasted Veggie Sandwich

Source: Y-Pulse (ypulse.org) 2017

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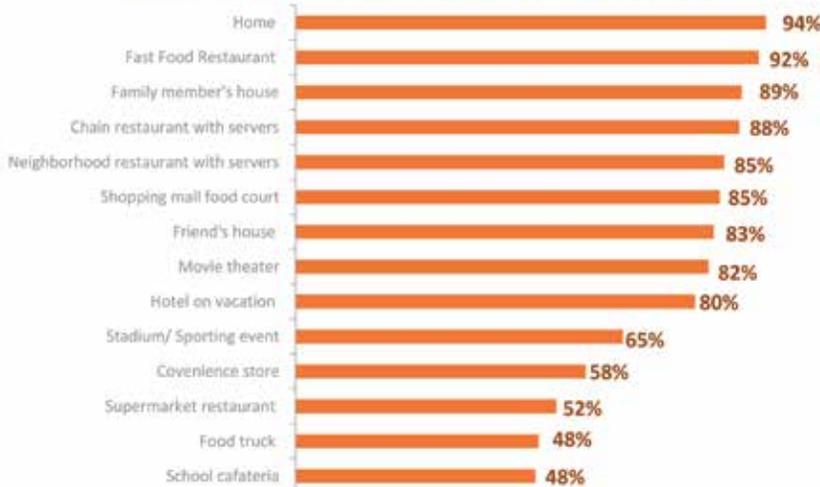
Your target market is the youngest consumer demographic. As school nutrition professionals, you are experts in understanding what appeals (and what doesn't) to students in your cafeterias; but you don't want to be merely responsive or reactive to the results of your observations. You want to get *ahead* of the trends to position your menus (and your entire program) in such a way that you can surprise and delight your customers, rather than play catch-up. This is why research focused on kids' food and foodservice preferences can be so valuable.

Top Scoring Concepts With K-12 Kids



Source: Y-Pulse (ypulse.org) 2017

Kids' Favorite Food Venues



Source: Y-Pulse (ypulse.org) 2017

Y-Pulse® is a firm that has been conducting in-depth surveys of kids' dining habits, attitudes and priorities for more than a decade. In recent months, the organization produced two reports with particular resonance for operators and vendors working in the K-12 foodservice segment: *Understanding Tomorrow's Tastemakers Today: Dining with K-12 Consumers* and *School Meal Innovation Lab™ Fall 2017*.

Last month, at SNA's 72nd Annual

National Conference (ANC) in Las Vegas, I had the pleasure of co-presenting an education session on these reports—featuring real-world examples of forward-leaning operations—alongside Y-Pulse Founding Partner Sharon Olson. (The slides from this session are available in SNA's online Presentations and Papers Library, www.schoolnutrition.org/Meetings/PresentationsLibrary, filed under Monday, July 9, with the same

title as this article.) This companion piece is intended to dig a little more deeply into some of the findings, with the full results of both studies available for sale by Y-Pulse (www.ypulse.org).

More than 1,000 boys (52%) and girls (48%), ages 8–18, participated in online surveys (with parent approval) for Y-Pulse's Tastemakers project. For numerous questions, students could select more than one answer, so findings frequently totaled more than 100%. In the 2017 School Meal Innovation Lab™ research, Y-Pulse tested both adults (1,020) and kids (900), also via the internet. Of the adults, two-thirds were women; 40% were ages 35-54. Of the children, 412 were ages 8-14 and 488 were 15-18-year-olds.

KNOW YOUR TASTEMAKERS

So, what do we know about this consumer group? We know that kids enjoy healthy foods—and indulgent items. They are adept at balancing comfort—and culinary adventure. Their favorite places to eat are at home—and at restaurants. According to Y-Pulse's findings, nearly 90% reported they enjoy eating foods at restaurants that they don't eat at home, while just over 90% indicated they like to order their favorite, familiar foods. In short, they are walking, talking contradictions!

Food media is having a growing influence on children today. More than half watch the Food Network and a similar number enjoy "Tasty"-style videos on social media. Almost half even try to cook some of the meals they've viewed on social media! And kids definitely want to be in touch with those media sources *when* they dine. A solid majority (76%) like restaurants that offer free wi-fi.

We may not know if they specifically reference Yelp for customer reviews, but 86% of kids like to eat at restaurants "they have heard good things about," while 78% say they like to try restaurants "that their friends have recommended." Of 14 different food venues specified in the Tastemakers study (see the box on page 62),



You can take this
test online and
pay by credit card.

the school cafeteria placed last, but it was still identified as a “favorite” by nearly half of the children in the survey. Home was considered the overwhelming favorite, a finding that has remained steady in these surveys since 2010.

When it comes to eating at home, 83% of students say they usually eat the same meal as their family, although 38% said their parents would prep a separate meal for them. A whopping 86% reported that their opinions matter when the family goes grocery shopping.

Chain restaurants with waiter service may be falling out of favor. While this category had the fourth-highest percentage of combined “love it”/“like it” ratings, the percentage of those giving it a “love it” has fallen from a high of 67% in 2010 to 56% in 2013 and 37% in 2017. In general, however, kids like restaurants “where they get their order quickly” (91%) and “where I can customize my meal” (87%). It might be surprising to learn that a significant majority (82%) notice if a restaurant is not clean and that the same percentage still consider eating at a restaurant to be a special occasion.

This study confirms other observations that the taste preferences of kids continues to grow more sophisticated. While 62% of youth like the food choices on the designated “kids” menu, an impressive 91% like the choices on the “regular” menu.

KNOW YOUR CUSTOMERS

When it comes to eating at the school cafeteria, Y-Pulse’s research shows a 10% increase over the last seven years in how much kids enjoy school food-service. More than half (55%) like the lunch options they find at school—and 32% stated that their favorite meals are served at school. But nearly 70% reported that they only ate a school lunch when there was something they *knew* they liked being served. Still, 37% said they “wish they could order lunch from school more often.”

The Tastemakers survey is a great

Go to: www.schoolnutrition.org/OnlinePDAs

“Understanding Tomorrow’s Tastemakers Today”

Completion of this test, with a passing score,

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1. ___ is a research firm conducting in-depth surveys of kids’ dining habits.

- Youth Pulse
 X-Pulse
 Y-Pulse
 Power Pulse

2. The Tastemakers project surveyed both adults and kids.

- True False

3. More than half of the kids surveyed specifically reported they watch ___.

- the Food Network
 Master Chef
 Top Chef
 all of the above

4. The school cafeteria placed last on a list of ___ favorite food venue categories.

- 4
 14
 24
 none of the above

5. Kids notice when a restaurant is not clean.

- True False

6. More of the kids surveyed liked the food choices on a restaurant’s “regular” menu versus the “kids” menu.

- True False

7. In the Tastemakers survey, ___ of surveyed kids stated their favorite meals are served at school.

- 10% 55%
 32% 70%

8. ___ was one of the menu concepts tested in the School Meal Innovation Lab.

- Spaghetti with Korean Meatballs
 Overnight Oatmeal
 Mexican Tostada
 all of the above

9. Only 15% of adults expected to see the menu concepts offered in a restaurant.

- True False

10. *School Nutrition* has been impressed to see ___ served in real-world school cafeterias this year.

- rattlesnake
 deep-fried crickets
 fiddleheads
 Yorkshire pudding

TEST COMPLETION & SUBMISSION DETAILS

To earn 1 Continuing Education Credit (CEU) toward SNA’s Certificate/Credentialing programs for this professional development article (PDA) test, you must achieve a passing score and the issue date (**August 2018**) must not be older than five (5) years from your Certificate/Credentialing period. A maximum of three (3) PDAs per year is allowable for SNA’s Certificate in School Nutrition program. There is no maximum of passing PDAs for those with the SNS Credential, submitted within the three-year period.

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03. Eating at the School Cafeteria

Feelings about experiences at the School Cafeteria remain mixed but are homogeneous across all age groups

- 55% like the lunch options at school
- 32% stated that their favorite meals are served at school
- 53% said their school offers lots of choices for lunch
- 69% stated that they only eat lunch at school when there is something they like
- 37% said they wish they could order lunch from school more often

Source: Y-Pulse [ypulse.org] 2017

affirmation of the impact of front-line cafeteria team members: 70% of those surveyed said they like the people who serve food in the cafeteria. A somewhat surprising 31% indicated they knew there was a chef at their school. Not surprisingly, a majority reported that the lunch period is too short (67%) and that portions are too small (68%).

KNOW YOUR POTENTIAL

Y-Pulse's School Meal Innovation Lab™ focuses on testing menu concepts, rather than specific recipes. It was created to encourage menu innovation among school nutrition operations in such a way that recognizes the unique challenges of this segment when it comes to regulatory standards, procurement, facilities, budget and labor. Ten concept recipes were developed and tested by a team of chefs and dietitians with experience in school foodservice. Each of the concepts had the goal of being competitive with offerings of fast-casual restaurants, while complying with school meal requirements. Professional photography was taken of each item.

The 10 menu concepts that were tested with both students and parents were:

- » Jamaican Jerk Tacos with Pineapple Salsa

- » Honey Sriracha Chicken Flatbread
- » Spaghetti with Korean Meatballs
- » Apple Kale Salad
- » Buddha Bowl
- » Banana Berry Smoothie
- » Overnight Oatmeal
- » Tex-Mex Breakfast Bowl
- » Mexican Tostada
- » Grilled Cheese and Roasted Veggie Sandwich

Adults and kids both selected the Smoothie and Tostada as their top choices among the menu concepts, followed by the Oatmeal and Breakfast Bowl.

Both children and adults identified **restaurants** as the “most likely” venue to find the 10 different concepts Y-Pulse tested. But when it came to perceptions related to the **school cafeteria**, kids and adults brought very different perspectives to the proverbial table. On average, only 15% of adults expected to see these menu concepts offered by a K-12 cafeteria, while nearly one-third of the students *did* find the concepts would fit with their school menu expectations.

There were interesting disparities between kids and parents on some of the individual menu concepts. For example, while only 6% of adults expected to see Jamaican Jerk Tacos

with Pineapple Salsa served in the school cafeteria, fully one-quarter of the kids found it a perfectly reasonable option for their menus. Similarly, just 21% of adults thought the Grilled Cheese and Roasted Veggie Sandwich would be fit for school meals, while nearly *half* (46%) of the kids did. Adults were also dubious about the Honey Sriracha Chicken Flatbread (only 8% expected it in schools), while 30% of kids could imagine it served in their cafeterias.

Want to see if kids will respond to these items in *your* cafeteria? Each of the menu concepts developed in the School Meal Innovation Lab has corresponding K-12 recipes available free of charge to school nutrition operators and available through Y-Pulse.

In the meantime, *School Nutrition* is seeing the findings of the Innovation Lab played out in real-world cafeterias from coast to coast. Over the last year, we've seen tremendous culinary creativity in school menus and have featured some of our top surprises in past issues, often in our “Things We Love” column. This includes ceviche in Oakland, Calif., a fish boil in Greenville County, S.C., and fiddleheads sautéed in garlic selling out in Falmouth, Maine. The number of food bars and made-to-order stations (sandwiches, soups, omelets, pasta, etc.) undoubtedly would be low on most adults' expectations lists for school menus. And while food trucks were a new venue category in the Y-Pulse research this year, we expect to see the numbers for that category skyrocket from K-12 exposure alone next time around.

What's the bottom line? Kids have a lot to say when it comes to their food experiences and expectations. They know what they want. Now, it's up to you to deliver. **SN**

Patricia Fitzgerald is editor of School Nutrition. To learn more about Y-Pulse and its research projects, visit www.ypulse.org or contact info@ypulse.org.