

Nutrition

The interest in Asian-inspired menus even extends - in an increasing number of schools - to offering sushi. According to The Dream Kitchen Survey® conducted by youth marketing firm Y-Pulse, "Kids show a surprisingly sophisticated range of food preferences and knowledge, including...sushi." Y-Pulse says that a number of 3rd through 5th-grade respondents put sushi on their list of foods they'd like to see in their dream kitchen, with some even noting that they want wasabi as an accompaniment.

FOOD Focus

Kids & the Kitchen: Making it **THEIR** Way



Research continually demonstrates that kids are becoming more daring in their food choices and eating habits. Phil Lempert, a consultant for the grocery industry, is one of many to capitalize on this burgeoning interest in food among kids. In January, he launched a website for kids who like to cook; he even coined a new term for them: kid foodies or "koodies" (www.koodies.net). As more children become interested in food, says Lempert, "Our hope is that we can empower kids through the site."

In connection with this general interest in food and food preparation, "Kids are more involved in the kitchen," reports Kay Logsdon, managing editor for The Food Channel. "Now, it is okay for both boys and girls to cook. Kids are interested in cooking and understand the basics." Barbara Jirka, PhD, SNS, customer marketing and brand manager for Tyson Foods, Inc., and industry representative to SNA's Board of Directors, cites research that indicates that 50% of kids like to watch cooking shows.

These influences have contributed to a trend toward customization. Logsdon calls it the "I, me, mine" trend, and points out that kids are happiest when they can pick and choose the foods they want from an array of healthy choices. Variety and customization allow everyone to feel welcome at the table. "Picky eaters are okay," explains Logsdon. "They are accepted. They can eat what they like."

Customization plays out in a burrito bar offered in middle and high schools in Jefferson County (Colo.) Public Schools. "Kids are thrilled to customize their own meals," says JeffCo Executive Chef Paul Schutt, "and we eliminate a lot of waste." Staff members put the burritos together as the students come through

the line. Kids like to see the meal being made—for one thing, it's an indicator to them that the menu item is fresh. Students can choose black or refried beans, and chicken, beef or pork, then pick their desired toppings from individually packaged containers on the bar. The custom burrito is offered as part of a reimbursable meal.

According to Jirka, the customization trend has positioned the made-to-order sandwich, assembled with a student's choice of ingredients, as the second-most preferred entrée, right behind pizza. This type of customization enhances another important factor for kids in school cafeterias. The custom sandwich "is an 'up' food," notes Jirka, "something [kids] can eat while [they] are looking up and socializing with friends, not looking down [and] eating with a knife and fork. It's all about socialization." [Editors' Note: For more on customization, see "The Next Big Thing," October 2009. And School Nutrition will explore the made-to-order trend in the September 2010 issue.]