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LIFE

I've Got Tekka Maki in My Lunchbox

Ethnic food trends and chef TV shows shape children's palates



Luke Bronson cooks octopus on the grill with his family in San Francisco. PHOTO: ANGELA DECENZO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By **DIANA KAPP**

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Samantha Schroeder's go-to lunch is tekka maki and dragon rolls. When asked where she might want to order take-out, the 8-year-old proposes yellow dal over rice from a local Indian restaurant in her hometown Saratoga Springs, N.Y. For breakfast, she makes fried egg sandwiches doused in hot sauce.

Samantha's tastes reflect a broader shift in American cuisine as tastes that might seem challenging to adults have become commonplace to U.S. children who appreciate the umami of Asian food and the heat of Latin dishes. Families are exposed to more cultures and embrace more ethnic foods as they grow up watching TV shows about celebrity chefs and learn about healthy choices at school and on the Internet.

Children may have tasted such flavors in the womb or in breast milk as infants, research shows. Now, seaweed is a regular snack at some schools, just like Goldfish crackers.

"I would ask kids 10 years ago 'What's your favorite food?'—it was pizza and spaghetti. Now they say sushi, even the raw fish," says Ani Loizzo, culinary director of Whole Foods' Lake Calhoun store in Minneapolis. "Ethnic foods have worked their way into so many landscapes," she says. "Kids' associations are very different from adults. They see it as delicious, but not risky."

Sushi sells at Costco and Walgreens drugstores, and GimMe seaweed packs, in varieties such as wasabi and sesame, are on airport newsstands. Los Angeles Unified School District's September menu features Bean and Cheese Pupusas with Spicy Slaw, and Teriyaki Chicken Bowls. Baby food has moved beyond peas and carrots to Thai Curry Vegetables with Rice, available from Ella's Kitchen brand. At 7-Eleven, the new private label line of snacks 7-Select GO!Smart includes sprouted tortilla chips in sriracha and sweet chili flavors.



Luke Bronson garnishes grilled octopus with his father, Po, in San Francisco. He instituted ethnic food night for family dinners a couple of years ago. PHOTO: ANGELA DECENZO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Cooking shows like "Man vs. Child" and "MasterChef Jr.," youth cooking classes, and the ethnic food truck fad are other ways foreign foods are capturing children's attention

Ms. Loizzo taught a sold out ethnic food camp to 5 to 12-year-olds this summer at Whole Foods. During Japanese week, they made okinimake—a cabbage pancake. “Usually cabbage and kids don’t mix well. But eight out of eight kids loved it,” she says.



Grilling the octopus and the lemon and lime flavoring. PHOTO: ANGELA DECENZO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Taste
is
first

sensed in the womb. A mother eats a burrito with ghost pepper sauce, and the flavor gets into the amniotic fluid and later into breast milk. Flavors from anise to vanilla have been picked up there.

Being introduced to a food repeatedly also impacts its acceptance. Pediatricians tell parents to keep putting the broccoli on the plate. Researchers find it takes between 10 and 12 encounters with a food before an infant will open to the taste. “A child’s palate will be a product of their experiences,” says Mark Schatzker, who wrote a book on how synthetic flavoring has infiltrated the American diet.

As waves of immigrants came to the U.S., their cuisines became interesting to U.S. diners. Since the 1960s U.S. diners have seen Thai and Ethiopian establishments abound and there are now around 9,000 sushi restaurants in the U.S. In 1970, there were just a handful of sushi spots located mostly in California and Hawaii, according to an ethnic food report in the journal *Comprehensive Reviews*.

Households with children under 18 are twice as likely as households without children to have eaten Korean, Indian, Thai, Hispanic or Caribbean in the last three months, according to market research firm Mintel. “We found that certain American parents regard certain ethnic cuisines as simply healthier. The freshness of the ingredients is important to them,” says Billy Roberts, Senior Food and Drink Analyst at Mintel.

Take seaweed, which is fast becoming a lunch box staple, and even a stocking stuffer. “In my lifetime I never thought kids would embrace seaweed,” says Jin Jun, founder of SeaSnax, roasted seaweed in six flavors, including some that add a Mexican twist such as chipotle, lime and jalapeño and sold with the tagline “It’s Strangely Addictive.”

“As kids in L.A., we had to hide in the corner to eat our seaweed,” she says. The U.S. has become the largest seaweed export market for Korea surpassing Japan last year, according to the Korea Agro-Fisheries and Food Trade Corporation.



Luke’s family enjoys the octopus with a cauliflower side dish and glasses of milk for the children. PHOTO: ANGELA DECENZO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Some children and parents are turning to Asian snacks because they are lactose and gluten-free. Others like the novelty. A few weeks ago, 16-year-old Sam Hartman and his dad took one their regular trips to H-Mart in Atlanta. Sam loves the ethnic grocery store chain of 40 stores across the country for their wide variety of “weird snacks.” Sometimes he goes for mochi, a bean paste “ice cream.” On a recent trip they picked up what he believes are squid-flavored nuts “wrapped in some sort of crunchy something. They tasted salty and a little fishy—in a good way,” he says.

San Francisco 14-year-old Luke Bronson instituted Ethnic Food Night in his house two years ago. “We lived in this diverse city, but we always just went to our local Mexican place and got burritos,” he recalls.

“I was like ‘Why don’t we get some real ethnic food?’” So began a weekly meal of a novel cuisine shared with his parents and sister, typically at a restaurant. Among their adventures: Korean barbecue, Thai street food, Basque, Senegalese and Burmese meals. At an Irish pub recently they ate a whole fried rabbit and half an octopus.



The palates of children in the U.S. are changing to embrace tastes once considered challenging by many adults. They gobble up sushi and seaweed. PHOTO: IVAN DANIK/CORBIS



Snack food makers find more children eating spicy and chili pepper-flavored crackers, nuts and chips. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Novelty-seeking is easier than ever for children. “They have a lot more access to information because of the Internet,” says Darren Tristano, executive vice president at food industry research firm Technomic Inc. “They have this sense of ‘I want to find

foods that define my generation, that isn’t what my father eats. I want what’s new and what’s next,” he says.

Sometimes children want to seem cool to their friends by eating new types of food. “Is someone liking kale or kombucha because they like the taste, or because it seems popular and has cultural cachet? It’s almost impossible to separate,” says New York University food science professor Amy Bentley, who studies the social, historical and cultural contexts of food. “It could be, ‘I drink coconut water because it gives me distinction.’ Or because my family can afford this,” she says.

In Fairfax, Calif., teen girls are swooning over Acai bowls, an anytime meal or snack the consistency of sorbet, made from the bright purple Brazilian fruit often blended with almond milk, and topped with things like coconut, kiwi and granola. They post pictures of their healthy creations on Instagram. There is an association they like. “This ties in with beaches and surfing and the whole nature thing,” says 13-year-old Aisling Swayne.

Snack companies feed off this new openness to unique flavors. Popular new offerings at Whole Foods Market include seaweed, coconut chips, and flavored chick peas, according to global grocery purchaser Dwight Richmond. In 2014, 41% of new snacks featured one or more of: chili flavor, Sichuan pepper flavor, Tabasco flavor, ancho chile pepper flavor, bird’s eye chili flavor, cayenne flavor, chorizo flavor, jalapeño flavor, natural jalapeño flavor and salsa flavor, according to Mintel. “Bold flavors like Jalapeño are rising through the ranks quickly,” says Holly Mensch, vice president of innovation at Diamond Foods which owns Kettle Brand chips, and offers red curry, Thai spice and sriracha chips in their line.

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