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# 'Picky' Review: The Age of Chicken Fingers

Children were once expected to eat the same food as the adults. The hard-to-please young diner is a recent phenomenon.



By  **Meghan Cox Gurdon**  [Follow](#)

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ALAMY

If you had to name a few typical foods for children, my guess is that you'd list chicken nuggets, pizza, French fries and maybe macaroni and cheese. Such "kid-friendly" foods have become the American norm, served every day in restaurants, school lunchrooms and millions of homes. So ubiquitous are highly processed, highly palatable victuals for children that microwaves are now fitted with special settings to heat them up.

Parents who try to inculcate in their children a taste for what we

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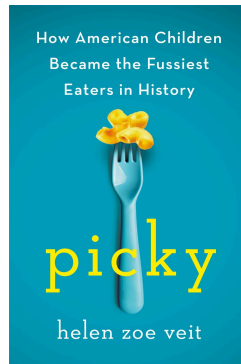
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## Picky: How American Children Became the Fussiest Eaters in History

By Helen Zoe Veit

St. Martin's Press

304 pages



have come to consider to be “adult” flavors—olives, salad, cabbage, lamb and suchlike—may have their successes, but overall American kiddie-food culture is devoted to the bland, the synthetic and the factory-made.

How bizarre it seems that in an era that fetishizes farm-to-table professional cooking and in which the home cook has access to esoteric ingredients that would have bewildered his ancestors, it has become routine to feed industrial food to children. Why is it socially risky to offer young visitors anything but mass-produced snacks and meals? I once hosted a children’s tea party and died inside (as did my children) when all our little guests turned up their noses at the cake I had baked from scratch. The cake had a butterscotch frosting, which was brown and thus “weird.” One of the more polite children at our doomed gathering explained that she only liked the pink and blue frosting on supermarket cakes.

Once upon a time, though, American children ate everything. As Helen Zoe Veit tells it in “Picky,” a “childish” appetite used to be one characterized by zest and indiscrimination. In the 19th century, children gobbled chiles and mutton and turnips and jellied pig’s brain. They demolished plates of dried beef, hoecakes, pickled eggs, roast venison and fried parsnips. “Children’s eagerness to eat was a cross-class phenomenon then,” she relates, “just as pickiness is a cross-class phenomenon now.”

Today we expect children to be fussy. We cajole them into trying unfamiliar foods. We bargain with them to eat a bite or two of vegetables before allowing them second helpings of the starchy things they really want. To make eating fun, we serve them chicken nuggets shaped like dinosaurs and

crackers shaped like goldfish. For tea parties, if we have any sense, we buy neon-frosted supermarket cakes.

“Before the 1930s, being a *picky eater* didn’t exist as a concept, much less as a normal or expected part of children’s identities,” writes Ms. Veit, who teaches history at Michigan State University and whose previous books on diet include “Modern Food, Moral Food” (2013). As she relates in this new and admirable work of social history, all sorts of elements—some well-intentioned, some cynically opportunistic—contributed to produce a wholesale reworking of the way America’s children approach their food.

Let us remember, as the author does, the hearty appetites of the 19th century. Back then people frowned at the notion of eating between meals, so snacking was not a thing. Children played hard and worked hard—often helping to produce and prepare the foods their families ate—and came to the table with gusto. Scientists had not yet discovered vitamins, so families did not fret about dietary “balance,” and there seems to have been little or none of the parental wheedling common today.

Social reformers, however, were already hard at work spreading what would be consequential ideas. In the mid-19th century, do-gooders such as William Alcott and Sarah Josepha Hale began urging children be fed a bland diet, lest rich flavoring imperil their health and futures. (“Condiment use today led to alcohol use tomorrow,” the author notes dryly of the reasoning.) Then came the child-centered activism of the Progressive Era, the intimidating advent of “scientific parenting” and the revolutionary 20th-century idea that to flourish children needed to eat “*specific quantities of indispensable foods*” as though consuming doses of medicine.

Writes Ms. Veit: “A pleasantly hungry nineteenth-century child helping herself to tasty, condiment-heavy dishes at a family meal looked very different from an early twentieth-century child staring down measured

portions of unseasoned baked fish, plain boiled spinach, and milky pudding, all of which his mother was insisting he had to finish for his five o'clock supper."

By the 1930s, parents began reporting the hitherto unseen phenomenon of children rejecting their meals. The concept of being picky was born, though it was still so new a word that food marketers put it in quotation marks. Then came more parenting fads, one crashing wave after another. Clara Davis, an influential pediatrician, taught that children possessed innate wisdom, and thus their preferences and cravings were a better guide to what they should eat than the dreary and tyrannical "dosage method." Benjamin Spock, another important pediatrician, channeled the ideas of Sigmund Freud, teaching that pickiness was a psychological problem for which the child's mother was to blame.

As the decades passed, family mealtimes became ever more fraught as more ideas caught hold: reverse psychology (if parents push a food, they incite rebellion), personalized eating (each member of the family gets a bespoke meal) and "acquired" taste (which ruled out some foods as kid-unfriendly). On top of all the sociopsychological wrangling, there came an explosion in the availability and affordability of portable, shelf-stable foods. By the 1960s, continual snacking had become the American way.

Ms. Veit is a wonderful writer who brings to her subject a wealth of research and an attitude of refreshingly nonideological neutrality. She brackets the body of her book with chapters that acknowledge the predicament of the modern parent—and offer encouragement—but otherwise she has written straight history that seeks to inform rather than to jeer or blame. If you have ever sat at a restaurant, marveling at the bilge offered on the kids' menu and wondering how on earth we got here, "Picky" has the answers.

—Mrs. Gurdon is a *Free Expression* columnist at *WSJ Opinion* and the author of "*The Enchanted Hour: The Miraculous Power of Reading Aloud in the Age of Distraction.*"

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