



PICKY *of the* LITTER

by Suzette Norris

As six kids, we spent a lot of time playing outside. My mother, for obvious reasons, often would throw us out and lock the doors. When we did get an afternoon out, our favorite spot was the trampoline place on Veterans, a patchwork of coiled springs and black squares that stretched across an old cement car lot. The black springy fabric would scald your feet then turn bone-breaking slick when the sprinklers came on. Hot, starved and damp from jumping, we'd always head to Shakey's

Pizza afterwards. It was a dark place with a big square window into the kitchen and cold pitchers of full-strength Coke.

Sitting at a long wooden table, we could barely contain ourselves until the pizza came. The younger three, watching the guy throw dough into the air, were convinced our very own pizza would arrive in minutes. The rest of us knew better. Our order was going to be held up by that "special" item.

Back in the 1970s nothing was custom.

Pizza came with pepperoni. Hamburgers came with mustard, catsup and a pickle. Having it "your way" was not a thing — everyone went along with the program. Everyone, except my sister Christy.

Christy would only eat shrimp pizza. For reasons I will never understand, Shakey's actually had it on the menu. But when someone actually ordered it they probably had to run down to Bucktown and back to grab the shrimp.

It's a good thing hunger pangs aren't fatal because Christy's pickiness extended well beyond pizza. Ordering dinner for eight at the Burger King drive thru window, for example, would require a 15-minute conversation with the little speaker box. At the end, my dad, would quickly add "and one hamburger plain — no mustard or ketchup." As we waited, the cars lined up behind us. When the food finally came, Christy would peek under the bun lightning fast. It always had ketchup, and we always had to turn around and get back in line.

Everyone knows a child or adult who is finicky. But experts say we're still a long way from fully understanding why some of us eat almost anything and others refuse to let one dribble of catsup pass the lips.

"A picky eater is not necessarily someone who rejects foods peers are comfortable eating, but rather is someone who is selective about what they eat. Some picky eaters are more restrictive than others," said Sandra May, a registered dietitian who specializes in community nutrition at the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center. "They could be picky about a certain group of foods or a lot of different foods. They are usually reluctant to eat or try new foods."

Experts estimate that 19 to 50 percent of kids up to age three are considered finicky eaters by their caregivers. In a 2016 study published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, researchers concluded that parents should be encouraged to extend their child's diet to include more nutrient-rich items (especially fruits and vegetables) and less nutrient-poor sugary foods. But parents should not be overly concerned about their child being particularly prone to inadequate nutrient intakes.

In other words, says May, power struggles over eating habits are typically not worth it.



If you can't stand it when one food touches another on the plate, you're not alone. "Customers can be very particular about how foods are presented," says Chef Stephen Huth of Restaurant Cypress in Metairie. "I once had to bring out seven dishes to serve a single entrée."

"Children and even adults may not like a particular food today, but over time their preferences change," she said. "Sometimes children want the same food for days, even weeks on end, but it's usually a phase. Continue to offer a variety of foods and encourage them to taste them."

Want your boyfriend to love sushi as much as you do? Studies show seven to 15 repeated exposures may increase one's acceptance of a new food. This doesn't mean forcing picky eaters to eat a certain thing, but there is value in calmly encouraging them to take one bite.

Starting with one food at a time is also helpful, May said. For example, if you want a child to try broccoli, then stick with broccoli. Offer it in different ways, such as raw with ranch dressing dip, steamed, with cheese, in a casserole, or as large pieces versus small florets.

Timing is important. "When it comes to small children, choose a time when he or she isn't tired or sick or just in a bad mood," she said. "When you offer a child a new food, be a role model and show that you like it too. Or

try a new food together as a family."

Consistent mealtimes play an important role in a child's willingness to try new or non-favorite foods. Insist on a set mealtime at the table a few times a week — at a minimum, May says. Studies show that when families sit down together at mealtime, the meals tend to be more nutritious. It also allows families to explore new foods together. Kids watch their parents and older siblings who can serve as role models. And it doesn't have to be dinner. Breakfast, lunch or even snack time can work as long as it's consistent. "Allowing kids to participate in food shopping and meal preparation can also play a tremendous role in a child's willingness to try new or non-favorite foods," May said.

Snacking also plays a role in a picky eater's life. Kids should be allowed to have a scheduled snack during the day as their stomachs can't hold a lot at one time. They shouldn't be allowed to graze all day, however. Snacks should be offered when it doesn't interfere with mealtime. And nutritious snacks (bananas, apples, celery and peanut butter, etc.) allow kids to get the nutrients they need

for proper growth and development that they may not get at mealtime.

Recent research from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign indicates there are a variety of reasons children and adults end up as picky eaters. Some preferences, such as avoiding spinach, may be hardwired. Research indicates that some children are genetically more sensitive to bitter flavors than others and may therefore take longer to acquire a taste for certain vegetables.

Other mealtime behavior, such as looking sad or even gagging, may not have to do with the food at all. A child may be upset and attempts to express her independence by refusing to eat, according to the study.

A helpful thing to remember is that people eat for all sorts of reasons, so experimenting with the different tastes and textures of food doesn't have to be only a nutritional exercise.

"In the South, eating is a cultural thing for us," May said. "We have crawfish boils when it's crawfish season, so it's just another thing that can influence our willingness to try new or non-favorite foods." ■