



Chef Hamish Ingham at his Bar H in Surry Hills, Sydney, with his children Harper, 3, and Hendrix, 11 months

Bub grub

Healthy, happy eating — it's possible for the discerning infant

Necia Wilden

AT mealtimes, we trot out all the old lines. “Down the big red lane. Choo-choo-choo. Yummy, yummy.”

Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn't, and daughter Juliette, aged 14 months, will turn her head away like a right little princess at the sight of her father trying to land yet another spoonful of salmon-and-potato mash.

But if it's something we're eating? “More, mummy, more.” Roast chicken with herbed rice stuffing; duck rillettes on sourdough; scallops with garlic and parmesan breadcrumbs. It doesn't seem to matter what it is, the chubby little hand reaches out.

But of course, it matters a lot what it is. If you thought baby food was just mush, pap and goo, you haven't been keeping up. Following a slew of research and advice from the scientific and medical communities, the best-fed kids today are eating foods aimed at educating their palates, ensuring their future health, preventing obesity and even determining their level of intelligence. They're dining out, too, at progressive family restaurants such as George Calombaris's Mama Baba in South Yarra, a chicken nugget-free zone aimed at encouraging little ones to eat with mum and dad from a very early age.

Because more than ever, the evidence is showing what parents eat makes the difference between dud bubs and superbubs.

Earlier this year, a study reported in *The Times of India*

concluded what a child eats for the 1000 days from conception to second birthday is what decides how healthy and brainy he or she will be for the rest of their lives. In this golden period, said scientists quoted in the article, at least 50 brain chemicals or neurotransmitters are affected by the intake of food and micronutrients; and “the impact of nutrition (at this time) is lasting and irreversible, with effects beyond physical health to affect the child's cognitive development”. The report followed decades of research undertaken by David Barker and colleagues at Southampton University.

Gulp. Juliette, have another mouthful of omega-3-packed fish. And some organic veggies, too, please, since your mother recently read a study by Stanford University saying if she feeds you conventional fruits and veg, your risk of ingesting endocrine-disrupting pesticides is five times higher than if I choose organic.

As a new parent – of advanced years – I'm floored by the amount of time I spend planning, shopping for and preparing meals for my daughter. Pediatrician Annie Moulden is sympathetic, saying parents cite mealtimes as their child-rearing issue of greatest concern. Yet she is also seeing an increasing number of families relying on highly processed foods. “I see families who are eating takeaway three or four times a week, and sharing that with their young children,” she says.

It's not just what they eat, says Moulden, it's also how much.

“There is a lot of overfeeding,” she says. “When the child tells you they've had enough, you should stop feeding them, but there's a temptation to keep feeding and that teaches them to overeat. We have an obesity crisis (in our society), and this is where it starts.”

Salt and sugar are the main villains. “So many parents think they have to put a treat in the child's lunchbox,” says Moulden. “When did it become normal to give your child a Freddo Frog every day?”

“There is no doubt if kids get fed a lot of salt and sugar, they develop a taste for a lot of salt and sugar.”

Backing Moulden is a Flinders University study reporting a third of babies aged six to eight months are already eating unhealthy foods such as sweet biscuits, and only 37 per cent of children that age are eating fruit and vegetables daily.

To find the equal and opposite reaction to all this junk baby-food action, you need look no further than the food and restaurant industry. Just out is a new book by Louise Fulton Keats (yes, Margaret Fulton is her grandmother), ***Cooking for Your Baby and Toddler***. Don't be surprised if you find your two-year-old reading it like a novel in bed and cooing over the photographs, as it's very much in the glossy-modern-cookbook genre. The recipes look good enough for grown-ups, too – beef, eggplant and mush-

Gulp. Juliette, have another mouthful of omega-3-packed fish

room ragu, ricotta and spinach ravioli, apple and cinnamon turnovers – and the author's advice is grounded in her training as a nutritionist.

Another blurring the lines between baby and adult food (maybe we should call it kidult food?) is Sydney chef Luke Mangan, whose new range of fresh, preservative- and additive-free products, Baby Bites, will be released online and in the refrigerator cabinets of Thomas Dux stores this month. “It's like food for you and me,” says Mangan of dishes such as chicken casserole with pearl barley and lamb pot roast. “Except lacking salt!”

“The whole idea is to educate their palates for healthy eating,” he says.

At Mama Baba, the very young are offered purees – pumpkin, three veg, apple and rhubarb – cooked sous-

vide and served in cute little jars, so mum and dad can take any leftovers home. Baby's eating solids? All mains are available as half-serves, so your one-year-old can tuck into the likes of pasta with braised chicken meatballs, or risotto with squid ink and calamari.

“I just don't want to see kids eating processed food,” says Calombaris, father of 14-month-old James. “Baby food should be simple, healthy and wholesome.”

Simple? Well, it depends on your definition. Sydney chef Hamish Ingham, of Bar H in Surry Hills, says his 11-month-old son Hendrix is just crazy about red-braised duck leg and Chinese sticky rice with dried mushrooms and Chinese sausage, both dishes on the menu at dad's restaurant.

Ingham says he and wife Rebecca encouraged Hendrix and daughter Harper, 3½, to eat widely from the age of four months, when they started on solids.

“They won't eat generic baby foods,” says Ingham. “I've tried giving them Heinz and they don't like it.”

“Some other parents look a bit surprised when they see an 11-month-old baby chewing on a duck leg. But I think it's good to get their palates going while they're young.”

Last week, we took Juliette out to lunch at a bright new child-friendly cafe in South Melbourne. Believed to be the first of its kind in Australia, CheekyChinos dedicates half its space to a supervised play area, so you can offload your little darling for as long as it takes you to relax over Allpress coffee and perhaps a BLT made with Noisette sourdough.

For Juliette's lunch, we ordered the mac-and-cheese (all very pure, of course, no nonsense added) and the housemade baked beans, and popped her in the high chair. She toyed with the pasta, ignored the beans and scoffed half of my corn fritters with avocado and tomato. The message was clear: I'll have what mummy's having. And then she went back to the serious business of play.