

TrendWatch: Gluten-free Cooking

AN EXPERT EXPLAINS WHAT RESTAURANTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SAFELY SERVING THE RISING NUMBER OF CUSTOMERS WITH GLUTEN ALLERGIES

by Jules E.D. Shepard

Having a customer suffer a severe reaction to the food your kitchen has prepared is a restaurant owner's worst nightmare. Fortunately, most people who are at risk of such reactions are highly assertive about sharing information on their food allergies with the wait staff and kitchen prior to meal preparation. Unfortunately, the number and types of food intolerances and allergies which your customers may present has increased at an alarming rate. Understanding, practicing and training staff to be knowledgeable and vigilant in food preparation to avoid such reactions is becoming not just preferable, but essential.

One such food intolerance that has recently grabbed the attention of the food industry is gluten-intolerance (pronounced "glooten") or celiac disease (pronounced "see-lee-ack"). As more and more Americans are diagnosed with this disease, finding gluten-free alternatives is increasingly becoming an issue when they dine out.

I was speaking with a restaurateur recently who had a particularly nasty experience that I will share by way of an eye-opening example. His restaurant promotes itself as having a "gluten-free friendly" menu, and it receives much business because of those menu items. His kitchen is not, however, exclusively gluten-free. He had trained his staff on the importance of ensuring no cross-contamination, and on marking gluten-free orders so that the kitchen could ensure safe food was delivered to the table.

One busy Sunday afternoon, a patron brought her children



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into the restaurant so that the kids could enjoy gluten-free macaroni and cheese in a restaurant environment. (For those of you who have not yet met someone who must eat gluten-free, you may not realize that this simple pleasure is rarely afforded to celiacs.) The family placed their gluten-free order, and the macaroni and cheese was soon delivered to the plates of the eager young children (only one of whom was celiac). About five minutes after the children had begun to devour their special meal, the waiter rushed out from the kitchen and grabbed the macaroni and cheese away from the kids who sat stone still, forks in hand, frozen with panic. After dashing back to the kitchen with the plates, the waiter returned apologetically to explain that the macaroni and cheese which had just been served was not, in fact, gluten-free. He offered to re-order the meal gluten-free, but by then the entire family was too upset to eat, and they left the restaurant in a huff, never to return.

As bad as that incident was for this restaurant, it was nothing compared to the damage that was done to its reputation after the mother emailed her county celiac support group with her story (including the gory details of how sick her daughter had become the next day). The tale – and its resultant loss of business – only got worse from there.

Gluten-free offerings are a blessing for the customers who need them, and they can be a boon for the savvy restaurateur who markets the menu properly. However, they must be handled consistently and accurately every time.

Why is celiac disease relevant to my restaurant?

It has been estimated that 1 in every 133 people in the United States has celiac disease (that's nearly 3 million people!). It has been dubbed "one of the most frequent genetically-based diseases of humankind" by Dr. Alessio Fasano, director of the University of Maryland Center for Celiac Research.

Every demographic, every town and city now has celiac members, with more being diagnosed every day. Although millions of Americans are estimated to suffer from celiac disease, up to 97

continued on page 20

The Gluten-Free Bar

Those adhering to a gluten-free diet may safely partake of distilled alcohols and others made from non-gluten grains, including the following:

- Armagnac
- Bourbon
- Brandy (those distilled from grapes or other fruits, such as Grand Marnier)
- Champagne
- Cider (without barley additives)
- Cognac
- Gin
- Grappa
- Kahlua
- Meade
- Ouzo
- Rum
- Sake
- Scotch whiskey
- Sherry
- Tequila (those with 100% agave)
- Vermouth
- Vodka
- Wine (including ports and sherries)

Notice that beer is not on this list, nor are typical wine coolers or hard lemonades and the like. Beer, of course, is made with grains celiacs must avoid (hence the wheat shaft pictured prominently on many beer labels) and most other bottled alcoholic beverages are made using malt (barley).

Unfortunately, manufacturers of alcoholic beverages rarely disclose exactly what goes into their product, so unless it is clearly displayed on the label, it is distilled or you otherwise know its origins, celiacs should avoid it.

Typical beer is brewed using only four ingredients: water, barley/malt, yeast and hops. Fortunately, there are finally some alternatives which now allow celiacs to enjoy beer again. A sampling:

- Bard's Tale Beer, www.bardsbeer.com
- Hambleton Ales Gluten and Wheat Free Ale, www.hambletonales.co.uk/gfa
- New France Beers, www.lesbieresnouvellefrance.com
- New Grist Beer, www.newgrist.com
- O'Brien Brewing, www.gbbeer.com.au
- Ramapo Valley Brewery, ramapovalleybrewery.com
- Redbridge Beer (Anheuser-Busch) www.redbridgebeer.com

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www.nearlynormalcooking.com

percent do not yet know it; the number of known sufferers of celiac is predicted to increase tenfold in the next few years according to a study by market research publisher Packaged Facts. In addition to people diagnosed with celiac disease, people who are wheat allergic and gluten intolerant also have to avoid gluten.

A gluten-free diet is recommended for other conditions, as well; some parents have found that eliminating gluten reduces autistic behavioral symptoms. In short, every sector of the food industry can expect to be affected by the demand from these growing numbers of consumers. In fact, the same 2006 Packaged Facts report predicts that the market for gluten-free foods will increase 25 percent annually, reaching \$1.7 billion in annual sales by the end of 2010.

What is celiac disease?

Celiac disease is a genetically-inherited autoimmune disorder also known as gluten intolerance. Gluten is the protein which provides elasticity in foods made with the grains wheat, barley and rye – grains that celiacs must avoid. Oats are often milled with unsafe grains, so celiacs typically avoid oats as well due to cross-contamination risks. As little as 1/8 of a teaspoon of gluten (approximately 1/1,000 of a slice of bread) can make a celiac sick.

If you wish to serve gluten-free foods, there are some steps you can take. At a bare minimum, kitchen staff should understand which menu items are gluten-free (see sidebar on page 22 for a list of gluten-containing ingredients). You should go over the ingredients in each existing menu item with your chef, double-checking that the soy sauce your restaurant uses, for example, does not have gluten in it. Consider modifying ingredients or brands to make this process easier and safer for everyone. Your staff should also be trained on avoiding cross-contamination in the kitchen. Simply because a gluten-free patron orders mashed potatoes and steak with no sauce, does not mean that his meal will therefore be gluten-free. Your kitchen must know to clean the utensils

and pans or grills before exposing the food to possible contaminants from previous sauces or crumbs. Prepared mixes are also often a culprit for hidden gluten – if your kitchen did not make it from scratch, check those ingredient labels!

Another big no-no is cross-contamination that occurs in the fryer. French fries should be gluten-free, for example, but they are no longer gluten-free when fried in the same fryer with the breaded chicken nuggets.

By now, we've all heard the disastrous story of McDonald's french fries: the company proclaimed that the fries were gluten- and milk-free, but then posted their nutritional listing on their website reflecting that the cooking oil which is used to fry their potatoes contains wheat and milk-derived flavoring. At least three lawsuits arose from their snafu, one seeking class-action status. Don't repeat their mistakes!

Marketing to gluten-free customers

Once you decide to be prepared for guests with gluten intolerance, train your staff and are confident in your cross-contamination-prevention procedures, what do you do next?

- Pore over your existing menu. Look for menu items that are already gluten-free, or can be made gluten-free by simple substitutions or cross-contamination avoiding procedures. Example: A quesadilla on your menu has gluten-free ingredients inside but is made with flour tortillas. Substitute corn tortillas to make a gluten-free alternative and ensure that the utensils and pan have been thoroughly cleaned between each food preparation.

- When you have identified gluten-free items, reprint the menu or mark gluten-free items in some way. Put a sign in your window and a note on all advertising indicating that the restaurant is "gluten-free friendly."

- Consult with a dietitian or other nutritional specialist to devise creative ways to add gluten-free menu items or substitutions.

- Once the menu is ready, begin marketing! Contact local celiac and

continued on page 22

autism support groups and let them know you understand their needs and your restaurant is ready to serve them safely. (See www.nearlynormalcooking.com for a link to a comprehensive list of celiac support groups worldwide.)

- Contact local papers/news media and let them know you are catering to this growing population. Contact local dietitians, gastroenterologist offices, and school nurses and supply menus for them to reference or distribute.

- Host a gluten-free dinner party at the restaurant and advertise by word of mouth (from the support groups) and other news media.

- Encourage local support groups and gastroenterology offices to have their business and social meetings at your establishment: it's in their best interest to see that you succeed as well!

- Send free samples, coupons or other goodwill items to celiac and celiac kids support group meetings.

- Remain vigilant in training your staff! This hard work will be paid back in goodwill and continued business and referral business from your new customers. **WR**

The National Restaurant Association, in collaboration with Phil Lempert, NBC's "Today" Show food editor also known as the "Supermarket Guru," promotes the Food Allergy Buddy (FAB) Dining Card program. This program underscores the restaurant industry's continuing efforts to meet the needs of its customers and promote its proactive commitment to food allergy safety.

The FAB Dining Card is available free online at www.foodallergybuddy.com. By simply logging onto the Food Allergy Buddy web site and with a few clicks of the mouse, customers can print out personalized cards at no charge that can be presented to a restaurant's staff and chef, detailing specific ingredients or foods to which they are allergic so that the restaurant can alter recipes accordingly. The Association also encourages restaurant operators to review the FAB web site and post a link to foodallergybuddy.com on their web site to provide this resource to their patrons.



THE BASICS:

WHAT'S GLUTEN-FREE AND WHAT'S NOT

Listed below is information your kitchen should know about gluten-containing and gluten-free ingredients. Posting this information where your wait staff and kitchen can see it and review it often will help them knowledgeably answer customer questions. An educated wait staff will go a long way to convincing customers that they can trust your restaurant.

Ingredients containing gluten:

- barley (including malt and malt flavoring)
- couscous
- oats, if contaminated with other gluten-containing grains
- rye
- triticale
- wheat in any form (including durum, semolina, kamut and spelt)

Gluten-free ingredients:

- amaranth
- arrowroot
- bean flour (such as fava and garbanzo)
- buckwheat (actually in the rhubarb family, not wheat!)
- corn (starch, flour and meal)
- flax
- millet
- nuts & nut flours
- potato (starch and flour)
- quinoa
- rape seed oil (used to make canola)
- rice

- sorghum
- soy
- tapioca (starch and flour)
- risotto (if not mixed with unsafe grains)

While this list of safe grains looks extensive, very few perform or taste like wheat flour. Fortunately, it is possible to cook gluten-free foods which taste nearly normal. I have devised a mixture of five of the above-listed grains which holds together like a wheat flour and even lacks the grainy, sometimes bitter taste of many gluten-free grains. Nearly Normal Gluten-Free Flour Mix™ may be used as a 1-for-1 substitute in most recipes calling for all-purpose flour. Mixing a large quantity of this flour mix to keep on-hand for use in your existing recipes calling for wheat flour will allow you to expand your customer base, and it won't break the bank. In addition to the flour mixture recipe, my cookbook contains a host of other recipes which are gluten-free and may be served as safe alternatives on your menu. Nearly Normal Cooking for Gluten-Free Eating is available at www.nearlynormalcooking.com, or via online booksellers such as Amazon.com. The website (the "Cooking Help" page) also provides information about consulting services for individuals or restaurants.

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