

foodservice

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Working Around Allergies

With more food allergies to look out for, the industry's knowledge is on the increase and improvements are being made. But there is still more to be done.

Living with allergies is one thing, but catering to the allergic is another – a point made very clear earlier when Chelsea Sugar's Grant Freeman died from an anaphylactic seizure while dining out.

Kim Koeller knows these dangers and, being allergic to multiple conditions herself, was in town last month speaking to the industry on her extensively researched book *Let's Eat Out with Celiac / Coeliac & Food Allergies!* Diagnosed with coeliac's disease and allergic to dairy, pork, seafood, nitrates, MSG, Penicillin and even nutrasweet, Koeller also experiences reactions to goose feathers and cats.

But living with these potential conditions has prompted her to aid both consumers and food service staff in collaborating better on dealing with allergies and the likelihood of more arising. "With more chemicals in processed foods, MSG and preservatives there is more potential for allergies. But then it's often hard to tell, there is a lot misdiagnosis. With my food allergens, my symptoms were quite different so it took a while for them to figure out what was going wrong," Koeller says.

The book is a joint effort between Koeller and food industry professional Robert La France. "Robert could eat anything – I could not. As I ate 80 percent of my meals away from home, in over 25 countries, I saw a real need for this type of product and thought 'why should an allergy affect my freedom to eat out'. There was very little other material on the matter. "So this book is all about what you can adventure to eat – not what not to eat."

With an estimated 300 million-plus people managing food allergies globally, she set to work on the book and a series of pocket versions with different food language and dish phrases. Koeller says the pair utilized the resources of 75 food, health, diet and language professionals to "revise, revise, revise" the

book's information to its finished product. The result could be likened to the Lonely Planet Guide for allergy sufferers – detailed, user friendly chapters on food source techniques advice, what to look

for from a selection of ethnic dishes, what to look for in beverage ingredients and how to better ascertain the needs of customers in a hospitality setting



With one in three New Zealanders diagnosed with having some form of allergy – with one in 100 considered serious – she says there is still not enough information on both the consumer and restaurant sides to deal with situations, but better testing techniques and research have improved this.

"It has to be a collaborative process with hospitality and educating consumers to explain their issues too. It's about education, communication, preparation and having an action plan if there's an emergency – who do I call, what do I do. Communication is a big one. We have seen situations where somebody will say only something like 'I don't like onions' when they are allergic to them. Saying that is a completely different thing to 'I am anaphylactic to them'. "And then you get people who say they are allergic to products when they [simply] don't like them – which makes it harder again."

She points out that New Zealand and Australia are world leaders when it comes to labeling – having first instituted product labeling laws in 2002, followed by the European Union in 2005 and the US in 2006. This gives NZ kitchens some edge when it comes to properly identifying product ingredients and Koeller says many of the nation's caterers and restaurants are well advanced with catering to the allergic.



“We are starting to see those changes. The last time I was here was six months ago – and there’s quite a difference between then and now. In Queenstown, with 300,000 people, there are three places which serve gluten-free pizza. Compare that to Chicago with a population of six million and you can find just a few.”

She points out that catering and hotels also have more of an advantage with food preparation, as they can access a customer’s dietary requirements often well in advance. “But of course it’s different with restaurants, as much is prepped well in advance so we’re trying to get across to consumers, as well, the nature of planning for their own needs.”

From the kitchen side, Koeller’s advice includes having a dedicated or separate work area, fryer and utensils to prevent cross contamination, prepping with flour that has no allergen ingredients in it, serving up food on different shaped or styled plates and using different colored order docket. Then there’s the need for effective communication between front of house and kitchen.

“Some staff or managers might be more experienced with dealing with allergic customers – put them in to serve.”



Management

- Do staff know about specialized diets?
- Are there training programs available to improve staff awareness?
- Is there a plan to take into account the need for ongoing training on the process and new allergies that are arising?
- Is there a certification process to advertise to guests?
- Is there an action plan in place to aid customers who have suffered a serious allergic reaction?
- What are other restaurants doing to offer allergy-free meals?

Kitchen

- Is food product labeling clear?
- What ingredients on your menu commonly cause allergic reactions?
- Are there dishes that can be easily altered to cater for those with special dietary needs?
- Which products/dishes can’t be altered to suit special dietary requirements?
- Is there a dedicated workspace/set of kitchen equipment used to prevent cross contamination?
- Is there a system in place to clearly separate normal from special dietary orders?
- Have special dietary dishes been confirmed, once made to wait staff?

Front of House

- Are special dietary requirements of a guest made clear?
- Have these been effectively explained to the kitchen?
- Does anything need to be explained to the guest following feedback from the kitchen?
- Upon service, can the kitchen confirm that any special requirements have been made?
- Has the guest’s experience confirmed that everything has been made right – on presentation and after their meal?
- Are there any interactions observed by the experience that can be advised to management to better improve the communication process?

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