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on Safe Dining

Approximately 13 million Americans are allergic to certain foods, such as shellfish, and more food companies are working to cater to special diet needs.

FOOD
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DRINK

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SAFE DINING

The Big Seven

Safe dining is vital for the millions of people living with food allergies. There are seven simple ways food operators can cater to this growing segment.

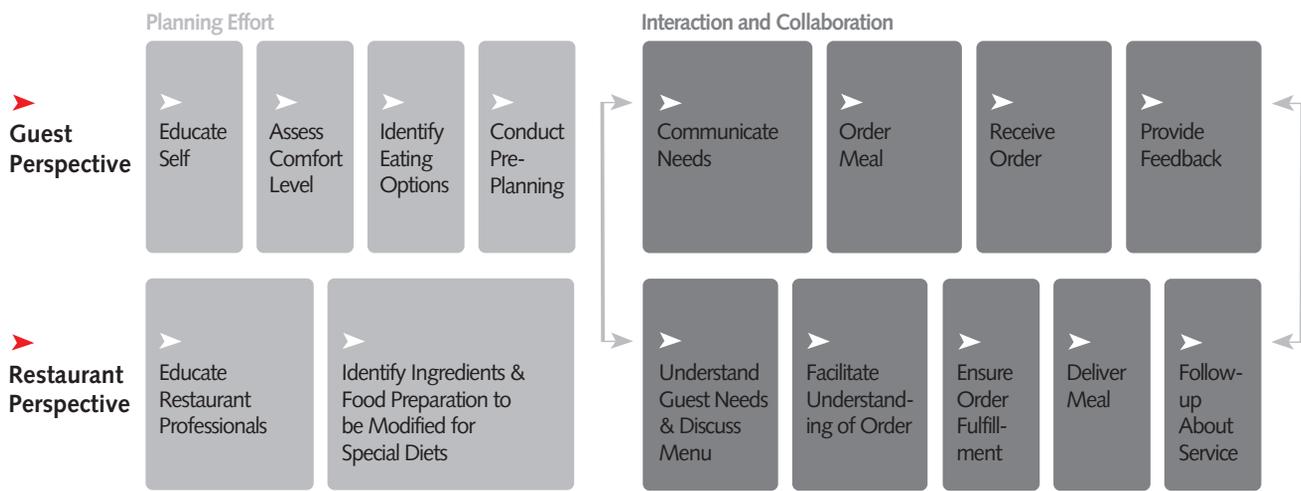
More than 100 million Americans – or approximately one-third of the U.S. population – require some type of specialized gluten-free or allergen-free diet, according to global research by AllergyFree Passport, a health education company dedicated to food allergy awareness.

The firm estimates that more than 300 million individuals worldwide manage special dietary needs. Because of this, “free-from” food markets around the world have seen double-digit growth rates in recent years. Most notably, the U.S. gluten-free market – valued at \$700 million in 2006 – is expected to grow to \$1.7 billion by 2010, with an annual growth rate of more than 25 percent, based on research from Packaged Facts research firm.

Gluten-free and allergen-free lifestyles are a necessity

for those diagnosed with food allergies, sensitivities and celiac disease – a genetic auto-immune disorder reflected in a permanent intolerance to gluten, the protein found in wheat, rye and barley. Once thought to be extremely rare, it has been found that celiac is the most common genetic disorder in North America and Europe. Based on a landmark multi-center study led by the University of Maryland in 2003, one in 133 Americans have celiac disease.

In June 2007, the National Institutes for Health declared food allergies an “important public health concern.” Approximately 13 million Americans have food allergies, with 90 percent of all food allergy reactions caused by eight foods: milk, soy, eggs, wheat, peanuts, tree nuts, fish and shellfish.



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Anaphylaxis, which is a potentially life-threatening allergic reaction affecting 1 percent of the population, causes an estimated 30,000 emergency room visits each year in the United States, according to The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network.

For those with allergies, eating out at restaurants is their most frequently cited concern. In fact, as many as 65 to 80 percent of people following gluten-free diets do not frequently eat out.

TABLES ARE TURNING

There is good news, however – many food service operators have begun taking extra steps in catering to those with food allergies. Disney properties, for example, offer special services for families managing special diets free from peanuts, tree nuts, gluten and dairy.

In addition, P.F. Chang's China Bistro has been offering gluten-free and allergen-free alternatives nationwide since 2003. Its Pei Wei take-out locations soon followed and its staff training requires a high level of knowledge on ingredients in each dish they prepare.

OSI Restaurant Partners – which operates a number of popular chains – offers gluten-free menus in many of its restaurants. Likewise, Chicago-based Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises has printed statements on menus requesting guests with food allergies to notify their server. Even single-unit operations do much of their business with gluten-free diners. Countless food manufacturers, including Pamela's Products Inc., specialize in foods for people with food allergies (see page 82 for more).

What foodservice providers all around the world are realizing is that guests with special dietary requirements have a lot in common. They are extremely loyal, will travel long distances and typically control the destination decision of their dining engagements.

SEVEN STEPS

For foodservice leaders looking to get on board with catering to those with allergies, the journey is well worth the effort, and not as difficult as many might think.

In order to achieve the optimal collaborative process with diners who have special needs, there are seven important steps to take to prepare an operation for the safe, happy and healthy guests. They are:

1. Educating your staff about allergen-free requirements by conducting training for your management and staff on the special diets
2. Identifying restaurant-specific ingredients and preparations to be potentially modified for specialized diets.
3. Understanding guests' special dietary needs by communicating with them
4. Facilitating accurate understanding of the order and special requirements by determining whether the special order is understood by the kitchen staff
6. Delivering and confirming a meal begins by presenting the meal to guest
7. Following up with your guest about service to ensure they had a satisfactory dining experience. Also, providing guest feedback to the manager and chef as needed

CROSS-CONTAMINATION CONSIDERATIONS

Cross-contamination occurs when a menu item is prepared in the same frying oil or boiling water as other foods containing gluten or other common allergens, or when microbes or food particles are transferred from one food to another by using the same knife, cutting board, etc., without washing them between uses.

To avoid this, restaurants should use a dedicated fryer for gluten-free foods, identify oils used for frying and monitor allergen foods prepared in a shared fryer. Also, wash all materials that may come in contact with food in hot, soapy water prior to preparing items for those following a gluten-free or allergen-free diet. 🍷

This article was excerpted from the award-winning *Let's Eat Out! Your Passport to Living Gluten and Allergy Free* book series by Kim Koeller and Robert La France of AllergyFree Passport® and its affiliate GlutenFree Passport®. For more information, visit www.allergyfreepassport.com or www.glutenfreepassport.com.