

Trends



Gluten-free dishes give operators some tasty opportunities.

Thanks to ever-increasing product improvements, today's chef has a larger palette for creativity than any of his predecessors could have ever imagined. Yet because of greater acknowledgement of -- and concerns about -- food allergies, chefs today are being asked to create their art without using all the "colors" on that palette.

Specifically, the market for gluten-free offerings is one of the fastest growing foodservice segments today, moving nearly hand-in-hand with its retail counterpart, which is expanding nearly 15 percent annually (according to market research group Spins Inc.).

Why? It's estimated that nearly 3 million people in the U.S. -- that's about 1 percent of the population -- suffer from celiac disease, also known as sprue or gluten-sensitive enteropathy. This serious food allergy is actually an immune system reaction against gluten protein, which can cause intestinal inflammation and damage to the digestive system. Bleeding, obstructions, or other complications can also accompany it and, in severe cases, celiac disease can lead to hospitalization or death.

The result is a lifestyle that's forced to be gluten-free. Identifying foods that contain wheat, rye, and barley gluten is relatively easy: pizza, bread, bagels, pasta, some breakfast cereals, noodles and bread crumbs, to name a few. Less obvious are foods like soy and teriyaki sauces, and foods containing MSG. Even beer is easily overlooked at first.

But even more difficult is determining which foods contain one of the many "hidden" sources of gluten. Condiments, sauces, balsamic vinegar, blue cheese, luncheon meats, soups, snack foods and beverages are all suspects. Even textured vegetable protein and items with baking powder or icing sugar are culprits.

The result is, for people who have celiac disease, dining out can become a major source of anxiety because of the risk of unintentionally eating something that contains gluten.

Because many experts believe celiac disease is seriously under-diagnosed in the U.S., the gluten-free market continues to grow by leaps and bounds. And foodservice chefs are getting extremely creative in their quest to create delicious, gluten-free offerings, substituting rice, corn, buckwheat millet and a whole variety of surrogates for the ill-tolerated gluten-filled foods.

Earlier this year Celiac UK sponsored a gluten-free cookery competition at Le Salon Culinare at the Hotelympia, London's major food exhibition. In New York, four-star restaurant chef Joseph Pace has put dozens of gluten-free items on the Risotteria menu, including pizza, beer, and even pasta (made from white beans).

It's a trend that's spreading across the country. Several major restaurant chains, including Outback Steakhouse and P.F. Chang's offer menus of gluten-free dishes. And regionals like Legal Sea Foods of Boston and Mitchell's Fish Market are following suit. Others are following quickly. California Wine and Food magazine goes so far as to predict that allergy activists will "push gluten-free symbols onto menus in 2006..."

So, while dining out used to be a source of anxiety for people with the disease because of their fear of unintentionally eating something containing gluten, now these same individuals are flocking to the gluten-free menus at select restaurants from coast to coast.

As chefs continue to learn about gluten-free ingredients, many are finding that simple substitutions can make gluten-filled meal gluten-free. Simply offering a burrito, wrap, taco or quesadilla on a corn tortilla suddenly turns it into a gluten-free dish which can be enjoyed by 100% of their customers, and welcomed each of those 3 million celiac disease sufferers.

However, experts advise chefs to use caution when preparing gluten-free meals. They urge chefs to read labels carefully, to prepare gluten-free meals with clean pans and utensils, to post lists of ingredients that contain gluten in food preparation areas, and, above all, to never assume that a product is gluten-free. When in doubt, they say, avoid using it.

