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Resources to Help Restaurants Respond to Food Allergies

INDUSTRY HEADLINES ^[1] // JULY 29, 2013



Some 15 million Americans have food allergies, according to Food Allergy Research & Education.

Nicole Friedman, a Chicago resident, has known for the past three years that her body reacts violently when she eats fish or tree nuts. She avoids these foods at all costs so she doesn't have to deal with the incessant itching on her tongue and ears, the welts that form on her tongue, and her throat closing.

One night she joined her friends at a local bar and, when they ordered a cheese quesadilla, Friedman thought that was a safe choice for her. Immediately after her first bite, her throat swelled, and her tongue itched. She managed to stave off what could have been a dire emergency with a dose of Benadryl from the drug store across the street. Still her allergic reaction puzzled her.

Cheese quesadillas didn't contain any tree nuts or fish.

Cross-contamination most likely caused Friedman's physical response.

"Even bleu cheese residue on a food handler's glove sends me into anaphylactic shock, which can be deadly," says Lynn Bolgen, who doesn't tolerate bleu mold.

Restaurant employees often don't realize how easy allergens can spread. If a chef mixes up the lids on two pots and one had been used to cook fish or shellfish, the condensation on the bottom of the lid transfers the allergens to the other pot, contaminating that dish.

The National Restaurant Association announced July 30 the launch of ServSafe Allergensä Online Course, a new online training course from the creators of the highly regarded ServSafe food safety program designed to help restaurants address food allergens. The education tool was developed in partnership with Food Allergy Research & Education (FARE).

When Bolgen repeatedly had bad reactions in her own restaurant, the Starlite Resort in Roslyn, Washington, she set about investigating the causes. Eventually that led her to create the company, Spot Check (spotck.com), that trains anyone who prepares food—whether in restaurants, hospitals, schools, nursing homes, or other places—how to best deal with people with allergies. Bolgen and her husband sold the Starlite several years ago to focus on Spot Check.

According to FARE, up to 15 million Americans have food allergies. Bolgen believes countless more may develop an upset stomach, but not have been diagnosed with a full-blown allergy.

"No matter what the response, restaurants don't want to make their guests uncomfortable," says Bolgen. "They probably won't return."

To date Spot Check, with offices in Seattle and Ellensburg, Washington, has provided training to more than 300 full-service restaurants across the U.S. and in Canada. To make the workshop affordable to everyone, Bolgen offers it as a "train the trainer" program. Restaurants can send one employee to the training and that person can train the rest of the staff when they return.

The course, which costs \$175 per person, focuses on the eight most prominent allergens—milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, wheat, and soy—which cause 90 percent of food reactions. Bolgen describes how easy these allergens can be spread and reveals tricks to stop the spreading. For instance, food workers should change their latex gloves after they have touched a variety of food, and parchment paper can be used to create a barrier between food and a counter that hasn't been sanitized. And when

substitutions need to be made for a guest it should be communicated to the entire restaurant staff.

“Communication is the key to handling food allergies,” says Bolgen. “When a customer tells the server he has a food allergy, then anyone working on that order needs to have that information.”

Justin Kindel, the restaurant manager for Parallel 37 in San Francisco, agrees, “When our staff makes guests feel comfortable revealing their allergies, then we can make sure they have a great dining experience.”

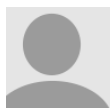
That’s why the servers at Parallel 37 ask each guest if they have any allergies or dietary restrictions when they take their order. Plus they keep a communal book that denotes last name, table number, and water preference as well as allergies and other reservation notes.

“Rather than make a guest with food issues feel like he or she is a burden, let them know you’re happy to accommodate them and the chef actually enjoys a challenge,” recommends Kindel.

Another resource, beneficial to diners and restaurants alike, is allergyeats.com. Paul Antico created the website in 2010 after being unable to find restaurants that could accommodate his two sons who have food allergies. The site’s goal is to list and rate restaurants based on their allergy-friendliness, as reviewed by diners. To date, there are 675,000 restaurants on the website.

By Heather Larson

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