

EAT WHEAT FREE

BY BARBI WALKER

Gluten-free! More restaurants are catering to the gluten-free crowd, and for those suffering from true allergies to gluten (a wheat protein), dining out has become more of a reality. However, it comes with its challenges. Altering a menu or simply removing items with gluten isn't enough. For restaurants, the decision to go gluten-free and advertise gluten-free should not be taken lightly.

For people with celiac disease, any contact with wheat proteins can have severe physical ramifications. According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), one in every 133 American adults suffers from celiac disease. For a restaurant to go truly gluten-free, here are many important factors that go into providing a safe, healthy and enjoyable dining experience for gluten-intolerant customers.

Gluten-free - not a fad diet

First, "gluten-free" is a way of life for people who suffer from gluten intolerance, or celiac disease. Celiac sufferers cannot tolerate this protein found in wheat, rye and barley which is commonly used in cookies, pastas, breads, pizza crust and other foods. The disease is a condition that affects the digestive system when protein gluten is consumed. In 2006 the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) listed wheat as a serious food allergen. In fact, Maricopa County's Food Safety Manual states: "Each year, millions of people in the United States have allergic reactions to foods. Most food allergies cause minor symptoms. However, some food allergies can cause severe, even life-threatening reactions. **Around 90 percent of serious food allergies are caused by contact with the proteins in these eight foods: milk, eggs, fish, crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, wheat, peanuts, or soybeans.**"

Rhonda Kane, a registered dietitian and consumer safety officer at the FDA says, "Eating gluten-free is not meant to be a diet craze. It's a medical necessity for those who have celiac disease."

Wheat, along with shellfish and nuts, results in the most severe allergic reactions and consequences for those subject to these allergies.

Making it gluten-free: a five-step recipe

Although the FDA has deemed wheat as an allergen, restaurants are mainly left on their own to navigate offerings on their gluten-free menus. "There are a couple of national bodies that do certifications, but there is no FDA standard," says Nina Spitzer,

president of Gluten Free-Absolutely! Spitzer, who has celiac disease, works with restaurants that want to add gluten-free options to their menus. She feels it's wonderful that restaurants are making these changes, but cautions that many businesses aren't aware of the intricacies involved. "Unfortunately, however, many are not aware of all the fine points of creating a 'safe' gluten-free menu for those with the greatest need, celiac disease patients," she says.

For restaurants considering a gluten-free option, Spitzer says there are three main and important steps to follow:

1. All ingredients must be checked with the manufacturer as gluten-free before being considered for a gluten-free menu item.
2. Managing the prep in the kitchen to eliminate any cross-contamination - where the protein of an allergy-causing food comes in contact with another food. Cross-contamination occurs if a cook uses the same cooking oil, knives, utensils, cutting boards, food containers, fryers and grills for both food items.
3. The staff must be trained and educated about proper storage and handling of gluten-free items to eliminate any cross-contamination — everyone from the owner and general manager, to the servers and even the host or hostess must maintain and be mindful of the gluten-free standards and policies, ensuring no wheat-based items come into contact with a gluten-free plate at any point.

Bon Appétit sans gluten

Fortunately there are numerous restaurants in Arizona that are offering gluten-free dishes. If you plan to dine out, Spitzer says the first thing to do is review the restaurant's menu. If you find gluten-free options or things that seem to be easily altered, it's a good idea to call the restaurant ahead of time to verify with the chef or manager. For dinner, she says 4:00 is a good time to call because it's before the dinner rush. This is especially important

if it's your first time dining at that restaurant. Tell the manager or chef that you are considering coming to the restaurant, you are allergic to gluten, and find out how the gluten-free dishes are prepared.

The Celiac Disease Foundation, Greater Phoenix chapter has a list of tried-and-true gluten-free restaurants, many of which have online menus. Some of the gluten-free restaurants with online menus include Nourish, Picazzo's Pizza, Havana Cafe, ZTejas, Pugzie's, and for those craving delicious desserts there's The White Chocolate Grill. Many more are listed on the chapter's website, phoenixceliac.org.

The Greater Phoenix chapter was founded by Spitzer as a support group for those with celiac disease. The foundation offers support, education and information to others suffering from celiac disease and has been involved with gluten-free restaurant menu projects. "We are blessed here in Phoenix to have so many restaurants, both chains and locally owned, willing to work with us," says Diane Lake, a spokeswoman for the chapter.

"Even the slightest mistake can make celiacs sick," says Spitzer. "I hope restaurants choosing to offer a gluten-free menu will do it with serious dedication and attention to these important medical needs."

Here is a list of local restaurants that offer a Gluten-Free menu:

Havana Cafe, havanacafe-az.com
Nourish, nourish123.com
Picazzo's Pizza, picazzo.com
Pugzie's, pugzies.com
The White Chocolate Grill, whitechocolategrill.com
ZTejas, tempe.ztejas.com
Heartline Cafe, heartlinecafe.com
Cafe Ole, Flagstaff
Mountain Oasis Restaurant, themenuplease.com/mountainoasis

SOURCES
celiac.org
digestive.niddk.nih.gov/diseases/pubs/celiac/
fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm265212.htm
glutenfreeabsolutely.com
maricopa.gov/EnvSvc/EnvHealth/Pdf/Engbook.pdf
phoenixceliac.org

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