

MARYLAND Hospitality

Winter 2009



Published for Members of the
Restaurant Association of Maryland

Good to be Gluten-Free

Restaurants meet demand
for gluten-free menus
and products

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Good to be Gluten-free

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Food is so central to our lives; it defines us, and where we come from. It enables us to express our values by thoughtfully choosing what we buy, how we treat our bodies, and how we care for those we love.

But for the millions of Americans who require a gluten-free diet, food has long been a source of isolation, loneliness, and fear. Even the ability to pick up a snack at the local convenience store, or dining out with friends and family, can be complicated.

Thankfully, it's getting easier to manage a gluten-free diet and still enjoy life!

The gluten-free diet has quickly become one of the fastest growing nutritional movements in America. This is due largely to an increased awareness of conditions such as celiac disease, which can be treated through a lifelong 100 percent gluten-free diet.

CELIAC DISEASE. WHAT'S THAT?

If you've never heard of celiac disease, you're not alone. Of the 3 million Americans living with the genetic autoimmune disorder, only 120,000 have been formally diagnosed.

Celiac disease affects the body's ability to absorb nutrients in the small intestine, and is triggered by an autoimmune response to gluten. When someone with celiac ingests gluten, the body attacks itself putting them at risk of developing complications such as other autoimmune disorders, neurological conditions, and even cancer.

Despite being the most common autoimmune disorder in the United States, celiac disease has gone largely undiagnosed because the symptoms often mimic other conditions such as Crohn's disease, chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, and irritable bowel syndrome.

Robin Rosenblum of Bethesda MD watched her oldest son Jacob struggle to get through a single class or sports practice due to bouts of intense stomach pains. "Something was seriously wrong, but no one could figure out what it was," she said.

Researching her son's symptoms online prompted Robin to ask her pediatrician if it might be celiac. After receiving a positive diagnosis "I was so relieved to finally have an answer," she said.

Jacob's symptoms quickly disappeared after changing his diet, and now the entire Rosenblum family is now happy, healthy and gluten-free.

THE GLUTEN-FREE INDUSTRY

The population with celiac disease is only a small portion of Americans living with medical conditions that respond positively to a gluten-free diet. More than 10 million people have been diagnosed with gluten sensitivity. Additionally, emerging research suggests the gluten-free diet benefits those with autism spectrum disorders, ADD/ADHD, and other autoimmune disorders such as lupus and multiple sclerosis.

Due to the growing number of Americans looking for gluten-free options, (nearly 15 to 25 percent of all consumers, estimates U.S. News and World Report) those entering the gluten-free market have enjoyed tremendous success and profits.

According to a 2008 Packaged Facts Report, the gluten-free market continues to experience double-digit growth (over 20 percent), in spite of the current economic recession. The industry is expected to reach \$2.6 billion by 2012.

Leading industry organizations such as the National Restaurant Association have also highlighted the enormous potential in this market, and even named 'gluten-free' a top food trend for 2009.

While many continue to label 'gluten-free' as a market trend, the diet often gets misrepresented as a fad. Despite the current popularity surrounding 'gluten-free,' the core population of this consumer market is comprised of those

who require the gluten-free diet out of medical necessity, and must adhere to the diet for life.

Because of this, gluten-free consumers dictate the food and dining practices of their friends and families as well.

"We no longer consider spontaneity an option, we want to be sure that our son can fend for himself when out with friends, and we can continue to enjoy time out as a family," says Rosenblum.

In the instance of Robin's family, restaurateurs who safely serve 1 gluten-free dinner also enjoy the patronage of 3 additional non gluten-free diners, potentially more. On a recent trip to a Chinese-restaurant, the owner prepared a dinner for 14 people, and made nearly all the dishes gluten-free so her son could share!

"We would have never been able to eat at that restaurant if they weren't able to serve my son."

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE GLUTEN-FREE?

Gluten is a protein particle found in all forms of wheat, barley and rye. Those on a gluten-free diet simply have to avoid eating any foods containing gluten. Easier said than done.

Not only must those on a gluten-free diet avoid all bread, bagels, cookies, pizza, beer, crackers, and cake made with wheat flour, but many other staple products, as well. Gluten is also found in wheat additives, the most common additive ingredient used in American food products, making most soups, sauces, seasoning mixes, marinades, and salad dressings off limits.

CATERING TO THE GLUTEN-FREE CONSUMER

While the gluten-free diet may seem restrictive and difficult, becoming a destination for gluten-free diners is not. Restaurants across the country are appealing to gluten-free consumers, and doing so safely, successfully, and easily.

Popular national chains such as PF Chang's and Uno Chicago Grill now offer gluten-free menus. At Maggiano's Little

Italy, customers can select from a menu listing of available wheat-free pastas and gluten-free sauces.

For those looking to appeal to gluten-free diners, developing separate offerings or an entirely new menu isn't required.

There are many delicious alternatives that can be used to make many popular menu items gluten-free. Wheat-free flours such as rice flour, potato flour, cornstarch, or tapioca flour can replace gluten as thickeners or in sauces and rues. Use potatoes, polenta, or exotic and nutritious grains like quinoa as side dish options for gluten-free dishes.

Lebanese Taverna's (www.lebanesetaverna.com) family owned restaurants serving authentic Middle Eastern cuisine throughout the Baltimore and Washington, D.C. area, launched gluten-free menus earlier this year. They were able to craft their gluten-free menu by making small changes (such as serving main dishes with sautéed vegetables, spiced rice, or rice crackers) to many items they already offered.

"Customers are really happy to see that we have a Gluten Free menu," says co-owner Grace Abi-Najm Shea. "We've received some press and lots of comments on blogs and websites... great positive feedback!"

CROSS CONTAMINATION CAUTION

The challenge for any restaurant operating in a shared kitchen is avoiding cross contamination. Gluten is a particle that cannot be removed by heat or conventional soap and water cleaning. Particles lingering in the air or on someone's hands can make their way onto a gluten-free plate and potentially harm the customer.

"If you can prevent food poisoning and nut allergen contamination, you can prevent gluten cross contamination – even in a dual kitchen!" says Nancy Baker, Director of Education for the National Foundation for Celiac Awareness (NFCA).

Baker created NFCA's Gluten-Free Resource Education Awareness Training

(GREAT) program; which educates restaurant staff on the gluten-free diet and includes information about best practices when serving those with celiac disease and ways to prevent cross contamination.

The GREAT program looks at potential hazards such as sharing condiments, utensils, grills, ovens, toaster space, and even boiling water. It provides simple strategies and organizational tactics that can prevent cross contamination. GREAT Training is available online through the NFCA website (www.celiaccentral.org).

"We learned how gluten is hidden in things like soy sauce and other items that I would have not considered," admits Abi-Najm Shea.

Seven Lebanese Taverna locations received GREAT training in conjunction with the launch of their gluten-free menu.

"GREAT educated our staff about the many challenges those with celiac disease and special dietary requirements face, but how easily it can be accommodated," she adds.

IMPROVING BOTTOM LINES, AS WELL AS LIVES!

For many who have ventured into the gluten-free marketplace, the outpouring of support and gratitude from their customers has been overwhelming.

"I've had mothers with children on gluten-free diets that are so happy to be able to eat in our restaurants," says Shea. "When people make the comment to me personally, I tell them how grateful I am that they are able to dine at our restaurant."

Equally as overwhelmed are those affected by the disease, and struggle daily to manage their health through a gluten-free diet.

"I remember thinking, we'll never eat out again," said Rosenblum about the days following her son's diagnosis, "Oddly enough, those same concerns motivated us to eat out more frequently than before! We are hopeful the number of gluten-free dining options continues to grow."