

RESTAURANTS AND FOOD ALLERGIES: MINIMIZING THE RISK

As the prevalence of food allergies soars, servers, chefs and managers play a bigger role than ever in keeping customers safe. // By Kelsey Casselbury

For more than a decade, health experts have been operating under the impression that somewhere between 11 and 15 million Americans suffer from food allergies of some sort. Equal to around 3.3 percent of the population, those estimates were nothing to scoff at. Which is why some chefs and restaurateurs took notice early that food allergies could affect their line of work.



Earlier this year, however, new numbers estimating the prevalence of food allergies came back. They were staggering. That previous estimate of 11 million wasn't just a mere lowball — it was less than half of the actual statistic. Now, experts say, around 32 million Americans

have food allergies, including 1 in 13 children. Additionally, anaphylactic food reactions increased 377 percent between 2007 and 2016, according to a review of insurance claim diagnoses.

Food allergies affect everyone, even those who don't suffer from them personally. However, those who work in restaurants must be particularly mindful of the impact of food allergies

for both the safety of their customers and financial health of their business — sometimes going to the extreme. Jeff Jacobs, owner of Carroll's Creek Cafe in Annapolis, Maryland, who has a son with severe food allergies, recently took the drastic step of completely eliminating all tree nuts and peanuts from the restaurant.

"It's estimated there's a loss of about \$45 million each week, or \$2 billion annually, from people avoiding restaurants [because of food allergies]," says Lisa Gabe, CEO of Food and Research Education (FARE). "If there's a restaurant that's the favorite of an athletic team, but there's two athletes with allergies, you don't just lose those two athletes — you lose the entire team, the parents and the fans."

Therefore, she adds, if you get a reputation for being food allergy-friendly, it can be a net positive for the restaurant. To earn that reputation, though, everyone — from servers to chefs to owners to executives — must be on board with creating and following food allergy policies and procedures.

KNOW THE LAW

Of course, managing food allergies at a restaurant isn't just about gaining a positive reputation. It's also about complying with the appropriate laws, which are piling up across the U.S.

As of June 2019, six states and two cities have enacted legislation pertaining to food allergies in restaurants. Some are

simple, like requiring an allergy awareness poster in the staff area or a line on the menu that informs customers to alert their server to a food allergy. Others focus heavily on food allergy education. For example, in Illinois, all restaurants are required to have at least one manager on duty with food allergen safety training at all times of operation.

A small 2015 survey published in the *Journal of Food Service Business Research* found that 80 percent of chefs, managers and restaurant owners had had food allergy training. But there were still significant gaps in knowledge, such as being able to name soy and fish among the top eight allergens. Additional research published the following year in the *Journal of Food Protection* found that more than 10 percent of restaurant staff and managers incorrectly believed that a person with food allergies could safely eat a small amount of that allergen.

MINIMIZING RISK FROM FRONT TO BACK

The path to keeping customers safe from food allergies in a restaurant begins at the front of the house, says Keith Norman, assistant executive chef at South Point Hotel, Casino and Spa in Las Vegas and author of “Allergen Awareness: A Chef’s Perspective.” All staff at South Point goes through a five-hour training course with Norman, then is buddied with a veteran who knows specific food allergy policies and procedures.

However, in Norman’s experience, customers don’t necessarily offer up information chefs need to keep them safe. “What we’ve worked on with the front team is making guests feel comfortable” sharing their allergens and intolerances, Norman says. “You have to make them feel welcome.”

Norman notes that he doesn’t train the FOH staff to ask about allergies, noting that when they initially did that, there was pushback from the guests. Instead, they look for trigger words. “Say you come into the restaurant and have a dairy allergy,” he posits. “You order chicken marsala and ask if there’s cheese in the dish. You gave an indication that there’s a problem, and we’re going to take it from there.”

When the order moves from the front of the house to the kitchen, additional procedures are in place. The POS system prints the order to the kitchen in bright red, so there’s no chance of missing the information.

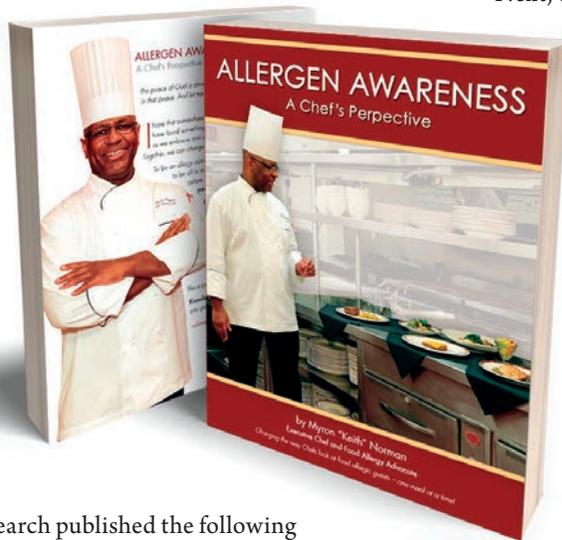
Next, the culinary staff uses an allergen kit that’s in the kitchen to prepare the meal. “The gloves come off, the hands are washed, and the purple gloves go on,” he says. (Purple has become the defacto color choice for allergen-free equipment in commercial kitchens.)

When the team at Carroll’s Creek Cafe began to research eliminating nuts about two years ago, they knew the process wasn’t going to be easy. “It’s not just ordering the nuts,” Jacobs says. “It’s finding all the places where there could be cross-contamination. What scared us the most is that we didn’t know where to look.”

In the end, the restaurant worked with a consulting firm to figure out where to look. The hardest part, he notes, was replacing the desserts, particularly the ice cream. However, the community feedback — nothing but praise — has been worth the effort.

“We didn’t see a downside” to eliminating nuts from the restaurant, Jacobs says. “We only saw the upside.”

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