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BRIEFING

Trends, innovations and events shaping foodservice in the EAME region

90

Are EU allergen regulations useful or hurting creativity?

95

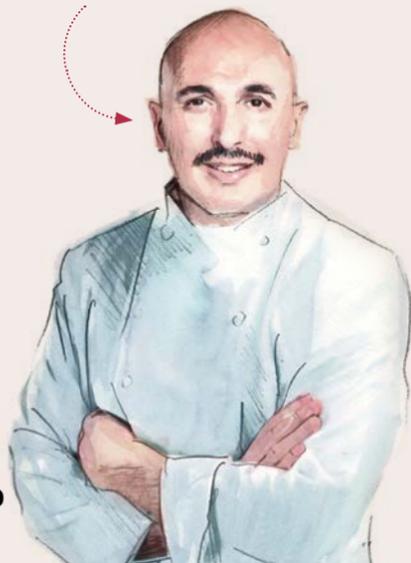
Cleaning up: the benefits of on premises laundry

99

African trade breakthrough: the foodservice benefits

102

Last bite: Andrea Ribaldone



The European Union (EU) regulations on food allergens were introduced across Europe last December, but what difference has it made? According to the European Academy of Allergy, food allergies affect 17 million people in Europe. Under the regulations, foodservice operators could risk large fines if they don't state which dishes contain any ingredients in a list of the EU's 14 top allergens – egg, molluscs, crustaceans, celery, milk, fish, tree nuts, sulphites, soya, sesame, peanut, mustard, lupin and gluten. This information needs to be clearly displayed.

In Germany, Gerd Schmidt FCSI from Cooking Solutions, believes that the new EU regulations aren't a problem for large commercial kitchens as every process is meticulously handled and every ingredient is clear from the start. "It is much more difficult for primary schools and care homes as the cooks are overburdened with the task of defining every ingredient they use," he says.

Consultant Hildegard Dorn-Petersen FCSI feels that the issue of food allergies is over-estimated. "In Germany, the percentage of the population with food allergies is between 2% and 4%, but these people have lived with the condition and know what to eat. Most of my clients have prepared a matrix or table listing every ingredient in each dish including side dishes such as mashed potatoes, but they tell me that, since December, no customers have asked to see it."

In France, since December, Denis Daveine FCSI of Alma Consulting and chair of FCSI France so far hasn't found any restaurants that include allergen information on their menus or signage such as 'If you have an allergy, please inform the waiter'. "No waiter has ever asked me if I have an allergy – I don't have one," says Daveine.

School caterers, on the other hand, have been aware of allergens long before the EU regulations came on board.



What's in it?

How much impact have the new regulations on food allergens had on the eating out experience across the EU? Jackie Mitchell investigates



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“Since 2003, in primary schools we have “protocole d’accueil individualise” for children with health problems, including allergies. In Nantes, where 15,000 school meals are served a day, if a child has a food allergy and they can’t substitute the allergen with something else, they use clearly labelled ready-made meals.”

Véronique Bockstal from Wheatless and More, specialising in the “free from” market, says awareness about the regulations is greater in the Netherlands than in Belgium. “In our training for foodservice operators in Belgium we get comments such as: ‘I don’t want customers with food allergies because they are a pain and we can’t handle them’,” she says.

“Major caterers, chains and top-end operators are ahead of mainstream players and have integrated mostly gluten- and lactose-free options in their offering. Some operators see the regulations as an opportunity to differentiate. Most believe food allergies affect a tiny minority and are not worth paying attention to.”

Exciting opportunity

In the UK, Michelle Berriedale-Johnson, director of the FreeFrom Eating Out Awards, launched the awards last year to raise awareness of the opportunities for ‘free from’ food within the foodservice sector once the new EU regulations came into force. “The industry is realising that, far from being an imposition, the regulations have opened up a whole new market,” she says.

“Bright operators realise that this market is offering them an exciting opportunity as this significant group of people (estimated to be 20% of the UK population) have tended not to eat out as they can’t find suitable foods. This group is loyal and social media savvy. If an outlet looks after them, they will benefit from enthusiastic social media activity.”

In the UK, the picture is “patchy” she says. “Large foodservice operators have



EU allergen legislation kills creativity

One of the arguments against the EU allergen regulations is that it kills creativity for chefs.

In Belgium this argument was used by foodservice associations to lobby for, and obtain, the EU legislation's exemption. This means they don't have to inform customers in writing about food allergens, but can do it orally, although staff must be trained to give correct information about the 14 allergens. Véronique Bockstal says: “Chefs said they weren't supposed to become food allergy experts and felt their creativity was being tested.”

In the UK, more than 100 chefs including Albert Roux, Prue Leith and Mark Hix wrote to *The Telegraph* warning that the rules were hurting “spontaneity, creativity and innovation”.

Caroline Benjamin from Food Allergy Training Consultancy, comments “The law doesn't change how chefs create dishes, they just need to be able to state their contents if one of the 14 allergens is included.”

Chef Steve Walpole says: “The fact that most didn't understand nor have all the facts about the law was an embarrassment. To say this legislation is stopping creativity is blinkered.”

been allergy aware for some years but unfortunately, many smaller operations have only just become aware about the regulations. That said, some small operators have really focused on this market offering varied ‘free from’ food.”

The winners of this year's FreeFrom Eating Out Awards will be revealed at a presentation at Food Matters Live at ExCeL, London, on Tuesday 17 November. Michelle is also in discussions about setting up the Awards in Germany.

Liz Allan from Allergy Aware Kitchen in the UK providing food allergy awareness training for caterers, thinks operators should realise “there's a massive ‘free from’ market and they could capitalise on it if they made the effort. Most provide consumers with written or oral information, but staff aren't up to scratch. They refer to an allergen matrix or table rather than telling customers what they can eat – that's a cop out.”

Operators need to have an allergen

policy in place. “This should give guidance to staff on everything from taking an order from a customer with a food allergy to preventing cross-contamination,” she says. “Staff training is crucial so they can explain to customers what's in the dishes. There must be communication between front of house and the kitchen.”

Hamish Renton, managing director, HRA, European Free From Consultancy, adds: “An easy-to-understand tool listing all potential allergens in each menu item is a good way of communicating to staff. They cannot be expected to memorise the allergens in each product.” ■