

# Against the grain

Is your business educated and prepared when it comes to food allergies? Writer Sue Fea investigates a new dining out initiative aiming to ensure that you are.

Eating out is like playing Russian roulette for the more than 200,000 allergy sufferers in New Zealand - many of them gluten free. Their eating out decisions also affect partners, families, friends and colleagues. Latest research estimates there are now between 200,000 and 250,000 people on a gluten free diet in New Zealand. About 65,000, or one in 70 Kiwis live with Coeliac disease. Numbers are on the rise and one of New Zealand's foremost dietitians, allergy specialist Anna Richards, says dining out can be a scary experience for many sufferers, especially Coeliacs.

Her adult daughter, well used to eating out in her corporate environment, was diagnosed with the disease late last year. "Now, if we're with her, where she eats we eat. She can't afford to eat anywhere that's not 100 per cent safe," says Anna.

A minuscule encounter with Worcester sauce in a small smear of salmon pate recently was enough to trigger severe vomiting. Abdominal cramps, vomiting and diarrhoea can onset rapidly, or a reaction may take a few days to hit with some patients.

Being diagnosed with Coeliac disease or an allergy can be life changing," says Anna. Sufferers end up having to ring ahead to a restaurant and ask 101 questions to be assured that there are protective measures in place. "If staff are fully aware of the problem and have good procedures in place then a serious sufferer can rest with a level of comfort."

"Chefs often don't get to see the serious consequences of even the slightest exposure for an allergy sufferer," she says. "They don't see the toddler covered in hives from top to toe because they touched a café table where egg had been spilt and not wiped down properly."

However, help is at hand. Coeliac NZ is launching a Dining Out Programme for gluten free diners, which Anna was contracted to put together. "With my daughter being diagnosed there was a real motivation there," she says.

It's a 90-minute online training programme for chefs and hospitality workers, covering everything from procurement to delivery of meals. "We need to train our hospitality staff that Coeliac disease is





## UTEN FREE AND ALLERGIES IN FOCUS



an autoimmune disorder and they need to be really careful about cross contamination. This course teaches them how that can happen, how to serve safe gluten free food to customers, so that they can feel safe and comfortable.”

The course is designed to pass, with participants unable to proceed to the next question until they get each answer right. Participants receive a certificate and the establishment also receives certification and logo stickers to display on their premises and website. Anna says it’s another qualification for hospitality workers to add to their CV’s. Policy and safe procurement of ingredients is covered in a gluten free plan. Gluten free ingredients need to be labelled and stored safely above other ingredients to protect against cross contamination. Businesses are also audited by Coeliac NZ and accredited for one year at which time they must be reassessed and complete an online refresher. The trademark logos are designed to be displayed in restaurant windows, on websites and on menus. “It makes it very easy for those diners to identify which places to eat at.” A senior staff member can also become Coeliac NZ-trained to lead other staff in the course, if required.

Anna says they’re targeting the hospitality industry and it’ll also be available for educational institutions, such as Polytechnics. “We’re hoping to eventually investigate having the course approved as an NZQA qualification,” she says. “We’re also looking at incorporating the programme into chef training at AUT and other institutions.”

A pilot of the programme has been warmly received in the meantime with a handful of restaurants and cafes throughout the country where it’s been trialled. Takapuna Beach Café staff in Auckland were so enthusiastic that they volunteered to take the online course in their own time at home. “The chef at St Heliers Café and Bistro was brilliant,” says Anna. “He had a separate bench area to one side for >





wheat preparation. They do a mean line of pizzas and he was concerned about the flour dust contaminating the kitchen, so I suggested he roll his bases on polenta, which works well to minimise that problem."

Coeliac NZ General Manager Carl Sunderland says the programme will be life changing for thousands of people. "There are thousands of people with coeliac disease and on gluten free diets in New Zealand, who are too nervous to eat out," he says. "It's the number one issue we get asked to help with. That's why we've developed this programme."

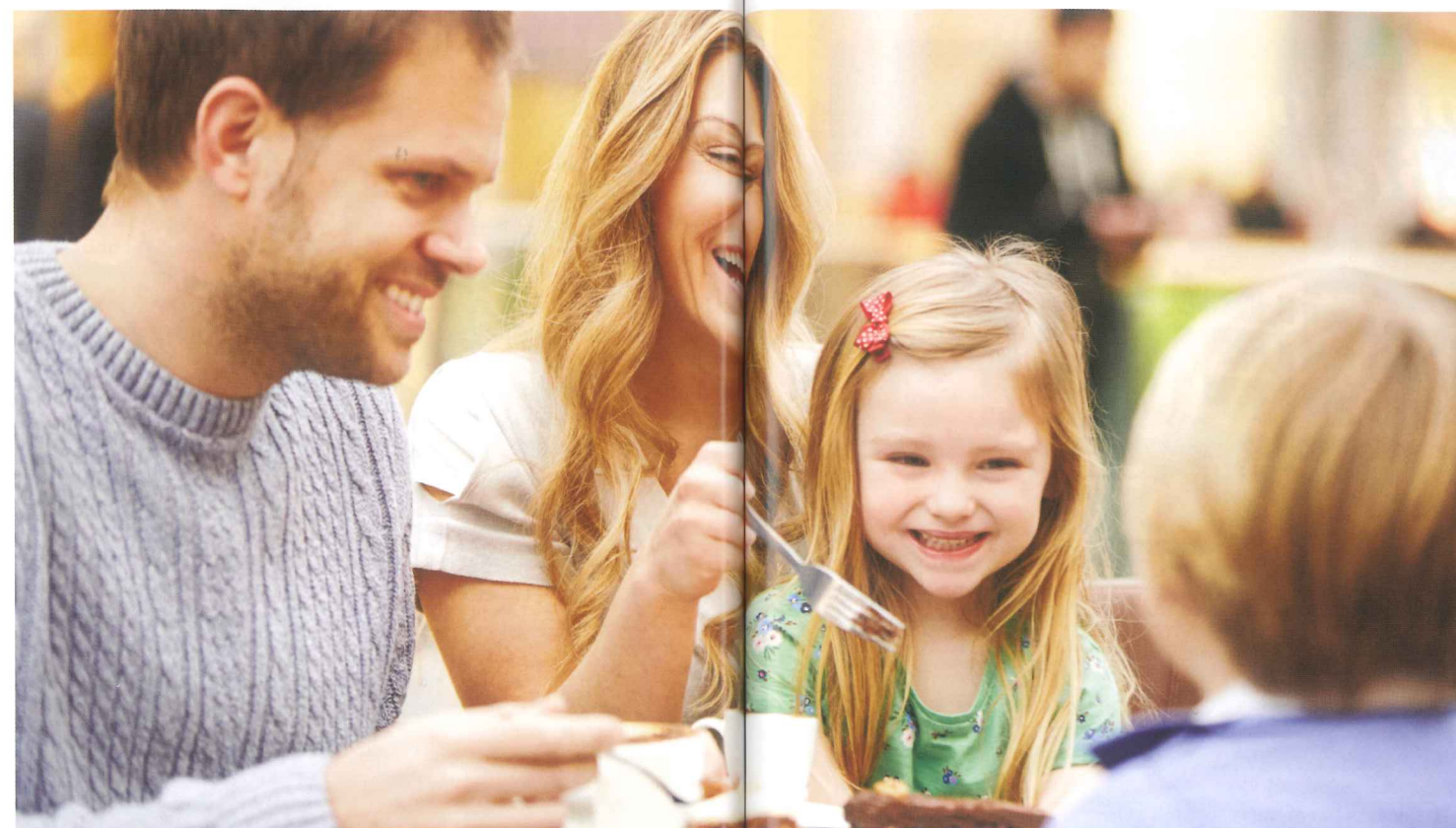
A restaurant can never guarantee absolute 100 percent protection – mistakes can occasionally be made, but the gluten free diner needs the extra level of assurance that the staff are trained and the venue has passed the audit, he says. "Businesses don't have a problem with protecting customers from bacteria – storing raw meat away from cooked meat, and this is no more difficult to get right."

There's an increasing groundswell of people who don't suffer a severe reaction, but simply feel better not eating gluten. Unfortunately these "gluten free fascimators and lifestylers" dilute the seriousness of the message for restaurant staff, says Anna. "Staff return to a table to see someone who has requested a gluten free meal tucking into a mouthful of a friend's carrot cake, which distorts the message."

As a dietician she's regularly working with hospitality clients and has had reports of a "double standard" in many restaurants and cafes. "They'll

## ANNA'S GLUTEN FREE KITCHEN TIPS:

- Use squirt bottles for mayos and sauces to avoid contaminated knives dipping into jars
- Put green dots on gluten free storage containers, red dots on others (change dots if someone dips an unclean utensil in)
- Wash all surfaces down with soapy, warm water each night. Do your gluten free prep first up in the morning, while surfaces are uncontaminated
- Use new gluten free testing swabs to detect traces of contamination on surfaces – the worst culprits
- Wash all cloths and aprons daily



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chuck out Procedure A for gluten frees and replace it with Procedure B, so if you're Coeliac it's like playing Russian roulette," says Anna.

Egg, dairy, fish, shellfish, peanut, soy and tree nut allergies are other common food allergens and exposure can be life threatening bringing on sudden anaphylaxis. These allergens must be labelled, or declared to consumers on request, on any food for sale under the FSANZ food code. There can be regional variations, and sesame is also a problem in Australia and New Zealand.

A restaurant customer died in the UK recently after allegedly eating undeclared peanut in a dish, and several people die in New Zealand every year, says Anna. "Hospitality staff really have to take this seriously and treat any allergy or food requirement as potentially life threatening."

Allergy NZ advisor Penny Jorgensen says latest research shows a doubling in the number of children under 12 months suffering from allergies in less than a decade. "Of concern is the prevalence of challenge-proven peanut allergies, which has also doubled, and as few children out-grow this, it indicates a likely increase in food allergy in adults in the future," she says. Ten percent of New Zealand kids had a doctor diagnosed allergy by the age of two, mainly to milk, eggs and peanuts. Almost any food can cause an allergy, says Penny, with more than 160 documented. Hospital admissions for food-triggered anaphylaxis in teenagers and adults almost doubled in New Zealand between 2002 and 2011, with much higher rates among Pacific people than other ethnicities, she says. "Internationally, anaphylaxis rates have doubled in the last decade, mainly due to the increase in food allergy."

The good news is that many New Zealand restaurants and cafes are embracing this new challenge head on and Coeliac NZ is hoping for a huge uptake to the new course, which Anna says they'll be making as affordable as possible. ■

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