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7 Things Restaurants Don't Understand About Gluten-Free Diners

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Whether you believe gluten-free dining is a crazy fad or a serious matter that deeply affects health, there are [millions of people with celiac disease or gluten intolerance](#) who sometimes actually want to venture out of their homes and eat in restaurants. While the dining scene is more gluten-free friendly than ever before, most restaurants could greatly improve the way they meet the needs of those of us who can't eat gluten...and they don't require reinventing the wheel.

Customers (and Servers) Need Info

Some restaurants are thoughtful enough to create a separate gluten-free menu (three cheers!), or to label items on their regular menu to indicate what's safe. This is a boon to diners, but most of the time these restaurants forget to indicate the gluten status of specials, sides, and desserts. The server rattles them off, then has to backtrack to the kitchen to find out if anything is gluten-free. We diners hope the server gets the information right and that nothing is lost in translation. It's confusing and time-consuming. If a restaurant is aware enough to label the menu, it should label all items, or at least provide servers with a list they can reference.

An Online Gluten-Free Menu Is a Must

Most gluten-free diners do their research before they go anywhere to eat—there's no point in going to a restaurant that is a complete gluten fest. Thus we read menus online first. Many, many restaurants have a gluten-free menu available, but don't bother to post it online. This is a huge omission. If there isn't a gluten-free menu online I can see, I'm probably not going to a restaurant.

Real Desserts Would Increase Business

Even when served a spectacular gluten-free meal at a restaurant, a gluten-free diner can reliably plan to be offered only the Tiresome Three for dessert: crème brûlée, ice cream, and flourless chocolate cake. These no-brainers are an easy go-to for kitchens, but I never want to eat any of them ever again in my lifetime. Gluten-free patrons are coming to a restaurant for a complete experience, and this includes dessert! If the kitchen doesn't feel comfortable making gluten-free cakes, pastries, brownies, or pies, there are plenty of wonderful gluten-free bakeries that will supply restaurants.

We Are Desperate for Substitutions

Restaurants know that an easy way to make many dishes gluten-free is to just remove whatever has the offending gluten: the sauce, breadcrumb topping, puff pastry crust, stuffing, salad dressing—usually whatever it is that makes the dish taste great. The result is often a sad plate with a bare, limp piece of meat or fish with no sauce at all (and charged at the same price as the complete dish). Simply subtracting gluten is a quick fix in a restaurant because it doesn't take much more effort to provide a substitution, but it's unsatisfying for the diner. Compound butter can be stored well and provides flavor if the kitchen can't (or won't) whip up a simple pan sauce. And any chef can pull together a basic vinaigrette dressing.

Another pet peeve is that gluten-free diners don't get a bread basket (or a discount) when it would be easy and inexpensive to offer a little crudité plate instead (or maybe just keep some gluten-free bread in the freezer).

Gluten is Not Necessary for Great Food

Gluten is so pervasive in our culture that most people don't realize it's used in many unnecessary ways. Restaurants in Ireland ([where there is a very high population of celiacs](#)) routinely thicken ALL sauces with cornstarch, use gluten-free breadcrumbs, and make salad dressing without gluten—and regular diners don't know and don't care. They also carry gluten-free breads, pastas, and desserts. We gluten-free foodies can tell you that we can make just about anything in our own kitchens without gluten, so it's very frustrating when a trained chef can't do the same. Why bother going to a restaurant if 80 percent of its menu is off limits? I've also been stunned to find gluten in restaurant foods it should never need to appear in, such as hollandaise sauce, hamburger patties (even sans bun), or risotto. Cooking without gluten is an easy way to be more inclusive without sacrificing flavor.

Gluten-Free Food Requires Attention to Details

Recently I ordered mussels in a white wine sauce after consulting with the waiter about gluten on the menu and being clear about my restrictions. My dish came with a big ol' piece of bread sitting on top of it, contaminating the otherwise gluten-free dish. This also often happens with salad—it gets plopped in front of you, full of evil little croutons. And then there is that lovely amuse-bouche offered as a bonus at the beginning of the meal. Except it's no bonus when it has gluten. There needs to be complete communication down the entire line in the kitchen when a diner is gluten-free. Beginning a meal with such errors makes me wonder if the food really is safe.

Gluten-Free Dining Requires Trust

Any diner with a food allergy or restriction places their health in the hands of the restaurant when they eat out. This shouldn't be too large of a burden, though, since all diners are relying on the restaurant to provide food that is safe. We're all hoping not to get food poisoning; those with allergies or intolerances simply have a few more concerns. We don't expect the local bagel shop or bakery to be able to feed us, but in a general restaurant working around food allergies is part of the job of cooking safely for diners. People with gluten problems have a lot of anxiety about the safety of their food. Please understand that and help us feel confident.

Brette Sember writes the blog [Taking Gluten Off the Table](#) and is the author of several cookbooks and [The Gluten-Free Guide to Travel](#).

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