

Food allergens have been much in the news lately. This summer, Congress cleared a bill requiring food labels to identify allergens in “easy-to-understand” language. A Mount Sinai telephone survey indicated that as many as 1 in 50 American adults may be allergic to seafood. And a recent study published in *The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* determined that many ER doctors lacked the training or experience to identify and correctly handle allergies to food, which have the potential to be fatal.

They’re not the only ones.

According to the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN), some 7 million Americans suffer from some type of food allergy, and the number appears to be growing. Each year, some 30,000 people visit the emergency room because of an allergic reaction to food, according to FAAN; as many as 200 of them will die. Clearly, chefs and operators need to educate themselves about this problem.

Although there are more than 200 different food substances



At Talula restaurant in Miami Beach, chef-owner Andrea Curto-Randazzo makes sure servers know what goes into every dish

that can trigger allergic symptoms, eight common foods account for 90 percent of all food-allergic reactions (see chart).

And in addition to true allergies—which can trigger immune system responses that affect the respiratory system, gastrointestinal tract, skin and cardiovascular system—millions more people suffer from food sensitivities, the symptoms of which can range from stomach aches and headaches to heart palpitations and difficulty breathing. The most common of these include lactose (dairy product) intolerance and celiac disease (a sensitivity to gluten, as in wheat).

This can be a tricky situation indeed. Dairy products and wheat are the lit-

eral stuff of life. Peanuts, notorious for causing allergic reactions, appear not just in the nut form, but also in such “hidden” products as peanut oil and peanut butter—which may be present in such seemingly innocuous foods as chili and Chinese food.

Proactive foodservice operators are reacting.

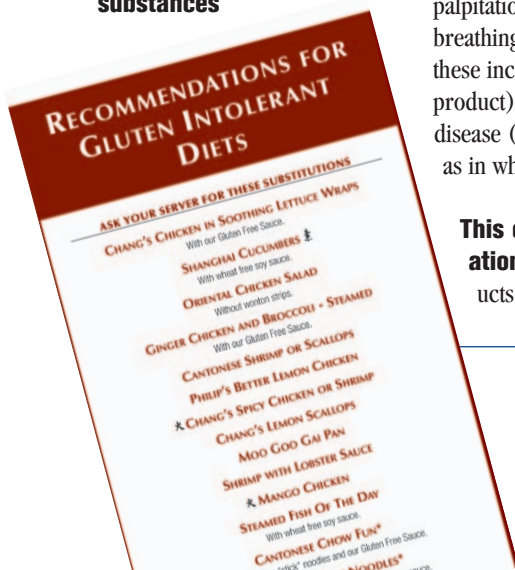
P.F. Chang’s China Bistro has a special gluten-free menu that includes versions of more than a dozen favorites, such as Cantonese Chow Fun made with rice-stick noodles and gluten-free sauce (made with wheat-free soy sauce) and Oriental Chicken Salad, hold the wonton strips. At Harvard University, where approximately 8% of the undergraduate population has some type of food allergy or sen-

sitivity, the Dining Services department has recently published the brochure “Food Allergies and Special Dietary Services,” and the executive chef for dining services will work directly with any student who has special dietary needs.

“We have to take it seriously, especially here in South Beach where people are very conscious about what they eat,” says Andrea Curto-Randazzo, chef-owner of the new Talula in Miami Beach. Fortunately, says Curto-Randazzo, “It’s been my experience that people with allergies let you know,” but just in case, servers are armed with detailed descriptions of what goes into everything that’s served, including specials, and are trained to come to one of the chefs if there is any doubt whatsoever about what’s safe and what’s not. “When you get people with allergies to common foods like wheat or dairy, it can become really difficult to feed them, but you have to be flexible, because the alternative is killing people.”

THE BIG EIGHT ALLERGENS

- ◆ Milk
- ◆ Eggs
- ◆ Peanuts
- ◆ Tree Nuts (i.e., walnuts, cashews)
- ◆ Fish
- ◆ Shellfish
- ◆ Soy
- ◆ Wheat



[link www.foodallergy.org](http://www.foodallergy.org)