Consumer Trends: Chefs Take On Food Allergies

BOSTON (Business Wire) — At New York City diner Shopsin's, owner Kenny Shopsin doesn't allow any substitutions to his menu items for any reason — including guests' food allergies. While many restaurant owners are willing and able to substitute ingredients or leave them out altogether to accommodate food-allergic guests, an increasing number of restaurateurs are choosing not to, implementing strict "no substitutions" policies instead. Paul Antico, Founder of AllergyEats [1], calls this a concerning trend for people with food allergies and intolerances.

"While I strongly believe that restaurant owners have the right to make their own rules, it's disappointing that some opt to enforce 'no substitutions' policies, where they won't accommodate food-allergic guests," Antico said. Antico created AllergyEats [2], the leading guide to allergy-friendly restaurants, to help food-allergic families quickly and easily find restaurants that will cater to their special dietary requirements – and avoid the ones that won't.

Diner owner Shopsin has a different opinion. "Some people tell me that they're deathly allergic to something and that I have to make sure it's not in their food. I kick them out," Shopsin wrote in his book *Eat Me: The Food and Philosophy of Kenny Shopsin*. If someone has a food allergy, he recommends they "go eat at a hospital" instead. Typically, restaurant owners aren't as blunt as Shopsin, but he's certainly not the only one implementing "no substitutions" policies.

Recently, Bon Appetit magazine spotlighted their Top 10 Restaurant List, an annual honor that's bestowed to an elite group of the hottest, most innovative restaurants nationwide. This year, they featured Little Serow [3] in Washington, DC on their list. This intimate Thai place, owned by husband-and-wife team Johnny Monis and Anne Marler, offers a set menu — and they are very upfront about their no substitutions policy. In the article, Monis defends their decision not to substitute ingredients for guests with specific preferences or food allergies, saying, "We wanted to create a specific experience, and we never intended it to be for everyone.

"Some chefs are comfortable losing a few customers who have allergies," according to a recent Bites on Today [4] article on Today.com, but, in fact, millions of people have food allergies, and accommodating their special dietary restrictions can significantly increase restaurants' bottom line. Food-allergic guests typically dine out with others, so by alienating someone with food allergies, a restaurant loses the revenue from this person's family and friends, as well. Antico's research has shown that restaurants that build reputations for accommodating guests with food allergies can increase their annual profits by as much as $50,000 or more per year.

At the recent AllergyEats Inaugural Food Allergy Conference for Restaurateurs, panels of experts, including Antico, emphasized the importance of investing in food allergy tools and training. The panels, which included restaurant owners and chefs, discussed how they had seen — and continue to see — significantly higher sales,

profits and customer loyalty by becoming allergy-friendly.

"There's no denying that the population and loyalty of the food allergy community is increasing, and restaurants that won't accommodate food-allergic guests will definitely lose business over time," Antico added.

Some chefs say it's a production issue. To make changes to a dish could interfere with the kitchen staff's timing. Other chefs believe that substitutions damage the "integrity" of a dish.

"Some would argue that the health and well-being of a guest is more important than the integrity of a dish, and that the integrity of a meal wouldn’t really be compromised if it's cooked without tree nuts, cheese or other food allergens," Antico continued.

"One chef in a 'no substitutions' restaurant commented that people wouldn't ask Picasso to change his art, so they shouldn't ask him to change his meal preparation. I’m not sure that’s a fair comparison since Picasso's art won’t make someone sick, but meals containing their food allergens will," Antico added. "That's why, like many others in the food allergy community, I choose to give my business to accommodating, allergy-friendly restaurants."

AllergyEats [5] constantly features stories of restaurants that work hard to implement food allergy protocols. Many train their staff, implement careful systems to avoid cross-contamination, know their ingredient lists and food preparation techniques, communicate carefully with guests and take every precaution to serve meals that don't contain guests' allergens.

"In my opinion, the restaurants that take food allergies seriously are the ones that should be highlighted in Best Restaurants lists. Those are the restaurants we should support, visit and recommend to our friends," Antico continued. "This trend of being unaccommodating is concerning and disappointing."

AllergyEats, a peer-based website and smartphone app, is dramatically improving the way food-allergic and gluten intolerant individuals find allergy-friendly restaurants. AllergyEats helps food-allergic families quickly and easily find restaurants that will cater to their special dietary requirements — and avoid the ones that won’t.

AllergyEats lists more than 575,000 restaurants nationwide, which food allergic diners can rate. The site also offers information on restaurants’ menus (including gluten-free menus), allergen lists, nutrition information, certifications, web links, directions and more. The site, app and related social media sites help families with food allergies reduce the guesswork — and the anxiety — surrounding dining out with food allergies.

This peer-based ratings and review site lets people see at-a-glance which restaurants have been more willing and better able to accommodate special dietary requirements, allowing food-allergic diners to make more informed choices about

where to dine.

Most restaurant review sites include information about establishments' food, ambiance or service, but AllergyEats is singularly focused on food allergies, with peer reviews spotlighting where people with food allergies or intolerances have more comfortably eaten.

AllergyEats has been endorsed by highly-respected food, health and allergy organizations and individuals, including the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, Gluten Intolerance Group, Massachusetts Restaurant Association, Chef Ming Tsai, Chef Joel Schaefer and more. AllergyEats was also recently selected as the About.com 2012 Readers' Choice Award winner for best Food Allergy App and was honored as one of Healthline's Top Ten Food Allergy Apps. For more information, please visit www.AllergyEats.com [6].

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