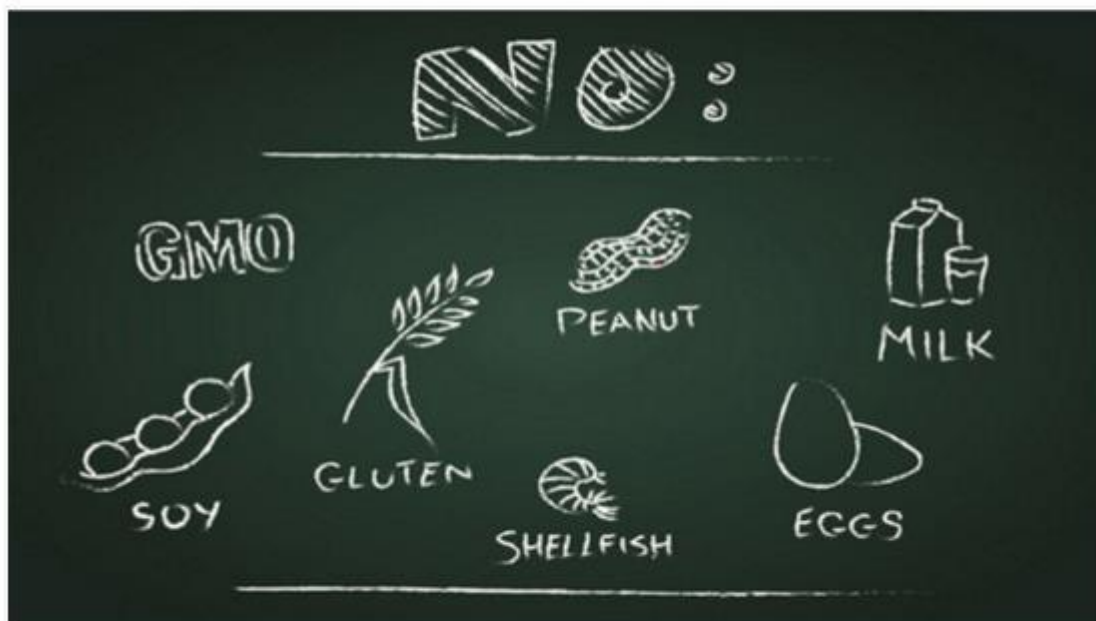


EU allergen laws - is the industry still falling short?

By Sophie Witts , 14-Dec-2015

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It's now one year since the EU Food Information for Consumers Regulation came in to force, requiring all restaurants to provide diners with a full breakdown of the ingredients in each dish.

Fourteen allergens including nuts, gluten and mustard must either be listed on menus or have their presence communicated by staff.

But while restaurants such as Bodean's and Handmade Burger Company are taking steps to offer a wider range of free-from dishes, a new study has revealed that many are failing to meet basic standards.

A survey of 100 people with allergies by the Food Allergy Training Consultancy found that while the number of sufferers eating out had risen by 54 per cent in the last year, many still felt unsafe when doing so.

Over a third found allergen information provided in restaurants 'confusing', 35 per cent spotted errors and only ten per cent said they felt more confident eating out since the EU laws came in to force.

Caroline Benjamin, founder of the Food Allergy Training Consultancy, said the results were 'not very surprising'.

"Currently food business are not paying attention to detail when managing the food allergy customer," said Benjamin.

"Training is of a bare minimum or is being overlooked. With allergen charts bearing very little resemblance to the composition of the dish. Let's just hope it doesn't take a tragedy for businesses to sit up and take notice of their obligations under the new regulations."

Chef resistance

In February the death of a diner who had a suspected allergic reaction at a Manchester restaurant was hailed as a 'wake up call' for the industry to take the rules seriously.

But despite the incident over 100 chefs including Albert Roux OBE, Mark Hix and Wahaca founder Thomasina Miers signed a letter in March slamming the law as a 'bureaucratic nightmare'.

They argued that it restricted 'spontaneity, creativity and innovation' within the industry and placed a burden on small, independent businesses.

However the letter was met with widespread criticism, with chef Steve Walpole arguing the list of signatures should have been a 'wall of shame'.

Pub grub struggles

Despite the grumbles of some top name chefs the restaurant industry has been largely praised for its response to the allergen laws.

A study by HospitalityGEM found that 72 per cent of diners said restaurants provided the best choice of free-from dishes.

However, only six per cent said pubs provided the best choice, compared to fast-food outlets (two per cent) and takeaways (zero per cent).

Hospitality GEM managing director Steven Pike told *The Morning Advertiser* the variety of pubs made the issue 'more complex'.

"A chain restaurant has a much more packaged offer that should be consistent whenever and wherever you go, this enables them to address allergy needs in a more targeted way," he said.

Pike added that pubs should tackle the problem by 'playing to their strengths' by offering allergen information in a more personal and less formulaic manner.

So what next?

While the hospitality sector still has some way to go in catering for the free-from market, failure to act could cost the industry millions in lost covers.

A YouGov report from September 2014 found that eight per cent of the population believe they had a dairy intolerance while seven per cent have an issue with wheat or gluten.

Coeliac UK estimates that the industry loses £100m a year by failing to cater for coeliac sufferers alone.

Liz Allen, director of Allergy Aware Kitchen, told BigHospitality in March that the industry was losing out on a huge financial opportunity.

"I think once the hospitality industry realises the number of customers they are missing out on by not catering to people with allergies things will change," said Allen.

"It's an untapped market and a good way of making money. If it's all about creativity why don't chefs think of other ingredients they could use?"

For those still unsure about allergen laws the British Hospitality Association has created an allergen toolkit , while the Food Standards Agency has published guidance for businesses.