

LEGISLATION

Allergens law anniversary: pubs struggle with consumer demand

By Daniel Woolfson , 09-Dec-2015
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Steven Pike: "Many operators are doing what they can to make consumers more confident when eating out"

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Pubs are still failing to provide a wider enough choice of dishes for customers with specialist diets since the introduction of EU legislation on allergens one year ago, new research claims.

Eighty nine percent of respondents to a survey by HospitalityGEM said the availability of 'free-from' foods when eating out had improved, but only 6% said pubs offered the best choice of dishes compared to restaurants (72%), takeaway businesses (0%) and fast food outlets (2%).

HospitalityGEM managing director Steven Pike said: "I think this comes down to the packaging. The pub offer is potentially more complex, as it implies a whole load of things around individuality of the location and sociability of the atmosphere."

"Whereas a chain restaurant for example 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."

"But let's not forget that many pubs have a well-recognised restaurant operation and it may just be that when people answered this question they read pubs as 'drinks-led' - in which case the results are less surprising, so there ought to be some caution in terms of how the results are interpreted."

The EU Food Information to Consumers regulation, which came into effect in December 2014, made it mandatory for food-serving businesses to provide accurate and detailed information about whether any of 14 common allergens were present in their food.

Play to their strengths

"In terms of how pubs can address this area, I would suggest they play to their strengths," added Pike.

"I used the words individuality and sociability - if these qualities can be applied to the way guests are helped with allergen requirements then it offers a more personal and less formulaic approach. Possibly harder to pull off, but one that would generate positive word-of-mouth."

While almost two thirds of the survey's respondents said ingredients were clearly communicated by eating out operators, one third said team members and staff were not well trained on the issue.

"The identification of staff training as an area in need of improvement should encourage the operator to look hard at their sites and how team members are briefed on this important aspect of food service," said Pike.

"It should be part of any induction and also revisited regularly as menus and teams change."

However despite the negative consumer perception of the pub sector, some pubs were doing extremely well and implementing controls whilst some pub chains had embraced the issue to the extent that it had become a marketing bonus, according to Dr Lisa Ackerley, food safety advisor to the British Hospitality Association (BHA).

Gluten-free

One issue surrounding the legislation proved particularly contentious throughout 2015: catering for gluten-free customers.

The market for gluten-free products and dining has exploded over the past year, with UK sales of gluten-free products reaching £184m in 2014, expected to grow by roughly 15% year-on-year by the Food Standards Agency (FSA).

Speaking to the *Publican's Morning Advertiser* in July, TV chef Phil Vickery of *This Morning* fame, said "ignorant and arrogant" chefs paid "lip service" to coeliac and gluten-free customers.

“The biggest problem is that the chefs think they know it all and just see [coeliac disease] as a fad. It’s not a fad, it’s a disease,” he said.

Increasing

However, a poll of *PMA* readers four months later reported that an increasing number of operators felt it was necessary to cater to gluten-free customers.

Sixty two percent of those asked said it was absolutely necessary, whilst 38% disagreed.

Stosie Madi, chef patron of the Parkers Arms, Newton in Bowland, told the *PMA*: “We’ve catered for all allergies and especially gluten-free – which is one of the most prevalent – since we started. It’s no hassle, it just requires a little bit of thinking and prior planning.

“It’s really important because people go out and talk about it and will recommend you.”

- **The *PMA* recently looked at the ways operators can boost their gluten-free food offer for Christmas.**