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THROUGH NETWORKING & EDUCATION



**OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS**, the availability of gluten-free products has skyrocketed due to people adopting this diet for health and lifestyle reasons. According to our research at Gluten Intolerance Group, an estimated 23 percent of U.S. adult shoppers reported gluten avoidance in their households, although only 1 percent of the population has celiac disease and only about half of these have been diagnosed. In addition, up to 13 percent of the population may have non-celiac gluten sensitivity (NCGS). With this percentage of consumers wanting gluten-free options, it should come as no surprise that from senior living communities to university dining halls, most foodservice programs have recognized the need for gluten-free options and now offer at least some appropriate menu items. It is an important part of institutional dining programs because celiac patients who ingest even a tiny particle of gluten can suffer from a host of medical problems ranging from malabsorption of essential vitamins



# SOURCING THE RIGHT

# ingredients

## FOR GLUTEN-FREE MENUS

BY CYNTHIA KELLY

and minerals to life-threatening conditions.

Additionally, when you factor in those who eat gluten-free for health and other reasons, the total number of people who have adopted a gluten-free diet amounts to about 25 percent of the U.S. population, indicating gluten-free diners are everywhere.

For those food services offering gluten-free options to this growing population, safety in doing so begins with the selection and sourcing of the right ingredients from suppliers. Choosing ingredients labeled gluten-free or certified gluten-free assures that the manufacturer is required to abide by FDA or certifier standards. Therefore, it's crucial to thoroughly vet all the gluten-free ingredients coming into a kitchen. The good news is, with the gluten-free market having come a long way in terms of quality and availability over the past decade, it's easier than ever to locate safe ingredients.

Through proper research, and following the five key steps below, your foodservice program will be moving towards creating exceptional gluten-free menus.

### 1. TAKE INVENTORY OF WHAT YOU ALREADY HAVE

When sourcing gluten-free products, start with an inventory checklist to identify the items already in your pantry that are naturally gluten-free, like rice or potatoes. Next, check labels to verify that products such as soy sauce and rice vinegars don't contain hidden sources of gluten. Other ingredients to look out for are products with seasonings, as well as salad dressings that use some type of cracker meal as a thickening agent instead of xanthan gum or guar gum. Looking for products certified as gluten-free is another way to confirm that you're using a safe ingredient.

Products with gluten-free labels must meet the FDA standard of less than 20 parts per million (ppm) of

gluten, while products that carry gluten-free certification marks must adhere to additional requirements for preventing cross-contact with gluten, including staff training, product testing, and manufacturing policies and procedures. For example, the Gluten-Free Certification Organization (GFCO) program requires certified products to have 10 ppm or less of gluten, testing of raw materials, clean production lines, and more.

Once you've established what's in the kitchen and know what is on order, you'll have a firm overview of products needing replacement or new ones to procure. While you work on this inventory checklist, be sure to bring in your chef for their expertise.

### 2. PROPERLY STORE GLUTEN-FREE INGREDIENTS

The proper storage of ingredients and equipment is an essential part of keeping your gluten-free items from coming into contact with gluten. A simple, yet necessary safeguard



includes making sure to not store gluten-containing ingredients or products above gluten-free ingredients, and pans and dishes used for gluten-free. Be sure to provide staff training on how to properly prepare, handle, and serve food to prevent cross-contact. An organization like the Gluten-Free Food Service (GFFS) can help through providing educational resources or gluten-free validation through an audit.

### 3. CONSULT WITH YOUR CHEF

When working to enhance gluten-free sourcing, getting your chef involved from the start is important because they are able to provide good counsel on ingredients to procure—foods they'll require to create a nutritious, delicious lineup of gluten-free menu items. A well-trained chef will know how to work with gluten-free flours and ingredients to produce the

best-tasting meals. Furthermore, ingredients sourced for gluten-free menu items should be able to infuse plenty of flavor, which is especially good for vulnerable populations like senior residents who may lack taste acuity but require dishes that aren't too spicy.

In selecting gluten-free ingredients to source, your foodservice team and chef should also ensure there are enough ingredients on hand for maximizing the variety of dishes on menus, which is vital to the success of gluten-free food service. Nothing dampens the appetites of gluten-free diners like encountering the same limited number of items on rotation, week after week.

### 4. GET TO KNOW GLUTEN-FREE SUBSTITUTES

While it is always best to use naturally gluten-free ingredients, dishes often call for foods that might contain gluten-containing grains like wheat, barley or rye, or ingredients containing these grains. There are

several grains that can be substituted for these grains. Some possible gluten-free grain substitutes include quinoa, amaranth and buckwheat, which are all very nutritious grains that can easily be incorporated in dishes.

### 5. ENGAGE WITH SUPPLIERS AND MANUFACTURERS

Most suppliers or distributors maintain comprehensive ingredient lists for all their products. This makes it easy to identify potential sources of gluten as well as those products that are gluten-free. Most of these companies offer information about gluten-free products in their online FAQs and product descriptions. Keep in mind that while distributors will likely have a great deal of information on potential allergens in their products, they may not know much about manufacturing processes.

If you want to use a specialty item that is listed as gluten-free on a label, contacting the manufacturer is the best way to confirm that the product is harvested and packaged using best practices to prevent cross-contact

with gluten. When changing brands or suppliers, check labels again. Doing an annual check to verify that products are still gluten-free is also a good idea, especially if you rely on distributor brands instead of commercial brands. If in doubt, always contact suppliers, distributors, or manufacturers directly to ask questions.

Attending food trade shows provides additional opportunities to maximize ideas for your gluten-free dishes. Expo East and Expo West are natural product shows that feature a significant number of gluten-free manufacturers who will allow you to taste their products. The National Restaurant Association Show and distributor shows offer similar

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opportunities. There are a number of consumer expos that go on around the country and provide opportunities to sample new products.

#### SUMMING IT UP

Searching for and sourcing ingredients that are truly gluten-free is the first step toward enhancing a gluten-free meal program your patrons will trust. By taking inventory of ingredients, working with a chef, and talking with suppliers and manufacturers, you can successfully meet the dietary and medical needs of your gluten-free diners, providing them with both peace of mind and dining experiences they will truly savor. **E**



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