



Grain of truth

How should the foodservice industry respond to growing demand for gluten-free food? Howard Reill investigates

Restaurateurs and consultants are always looking for trends, and gluten-free is certainly a prevalent one. But there are questions that must be asked: exactly who is the gluten-free consumer? How much revenue can such offerings generate? And what's the best way to incorporate them into a menu?

Gluten-free food isn't only for the estimated three-million Americans living

with coeliac disease. Rather, it has become part and parcel of what Americans view as a healthier way of life. Indeed, one of the dining out trends that analysts at Chicago-based Technomic Inc believe "may be transformative in 2015" is "do-it-yourself health". Menus "increasingly display pick-and-choose options for everyone from gluten-free eaters to vegans to paleo-diet partisans;

“Mostly you are seeing restaurants identify which items are already gluten-free on their menus. There are now gluten-free pizza options, pasta and sandwiches”

offerings are switched out as nutrition fads and fashions come and go.”

The National Restaurant Association urges restaurants to “reach more guests by offering gluten-free meals. Diners request 200 million gluten-free meals annually, and 30% of adults want to eliminate or reduce the amount of gluten in their diet, according to NPD Group research.” For those operators who do need to make sure they follow FDA standards. Items labeled gluten-free, no gluten, free of gluten or without gluten must not contain wheat, rye, barley, or crossbred hybrids of these grains, and contain fewer than 20 parts per million of gluten. Local health departments are empowered to enforce the regulation.

Gluten-free dining has gained popularity, but is it a trend that restaurants should commit to? Sandra A Matheson FCSI, principal of Food Systems Consulting Inc in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, says she has “absolutely” seen an increased interest in gluten-free restaurant dining. “As the availability of better quality and better tasting gluten-free foods has increased, more of those with the less troubling intolerance are more willing to eliminate foods containing gluten.”

Restaurants in all segments, she adds, are highlighting foods that do not contain gluten naturally, like fruits and vegetables and animal proteins, and then adding

items such as rice and corn-based pastas, baked goods and then novel items – or items used in new ways – such as using lettuce leaves as a container for burgers.”

“Mostly you are seeing restaurants identify which items are already gluten-free on their menus,” says David Kincheloe, president of

National Restaurant Consultants in Golden, Colorado. “There are now gluten-free pizza options, pasta and sandwiches.”

In research that Matheson and her colleagues undertook, all restaurants that made menu changes “were getting positive feedback and uptake from customers, especially in the family dining and upscale casual segments”.

Louise M Dutton, the owner-operator of Weezies Gluten Free Kitchen in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, notes that 80% of her customers have coeliac disease. “The others either have some form of intolerance or other health related issues where they need to avoid gluten all together.”

Emerging market

Diners find Weezies using apps specifically targeting gluten-free. “Being gluten intolerant myself, there is a great need for safe places to eat,” Dutton says. “Regular folks wander in because they see our reviews on Yelp and are really floored by how good gluten-free food can be.”

The increased interest in gluten-free restaurant dining “cannot be avoided or denied”, insists Karen Malody FCSI, the principal of Culinary Options in Santa Fe, New Mexico. “Now, does that mean that restaurants need to go crazy and make half of their menu gluten-free?” she asks. “No. But it means being serious about it, and assuring that two to four items, at least, are genuinely gluten free.” She says she once designed a menu “and realised that, without relying on contrivance or manipulated sleight of hand, 30% of the offerings were authentically gluten-free. People over-think this issue in the kitchen. Just rely on real foods, keep them away from gluten-contaminated ingredients,



200 millionGluten-free meals
eaten annually

and be proud of the natural offerings.”

Malody also sees restaurants adding corn-based items like tortillas, arepas and pupusas, salads, stuffed baked potatoes, egg-based dishes, and grilled vegetable dishes. “Having gluten-free bread is becoming a requirement, yet I will always remind clients that there are hundreds of options that are gluten-free by their very nature, without having to rely on, in many cases, marginal gluten-free baked goods.”

“Over the last few years we have seen a big gluten-free market open up,” says Gary Leech, president of Congdon’s Family Restaurant & Bakery in Wells, Maine. Breakfast is his busiest part of the day. He offers guests gluten-free bagels,

muffins, English muffins, cookies and toast options. “The bagels, muffins and toast are our top sellers,” he says. “We do charge a premium for this option – most guests don’t have a problem with that.”

Re-thinking production

“Many restaurants that are bread-based have already rolled out gluten-free items,” says Leech. “The pizza industry has been doing a good job for years. You see it in the sub market, too.” The variety of bread that is available today is tasty and good quality, he adds. “Scratch products are harder to do as you need a separate kitchen so as not to have any contamination from flour, and I do believe that is the way the market will support

“Scratch products are harder to do as you need a separate kitchen to not have any contamination from flour... the market will support this [by] others handling production”

30%

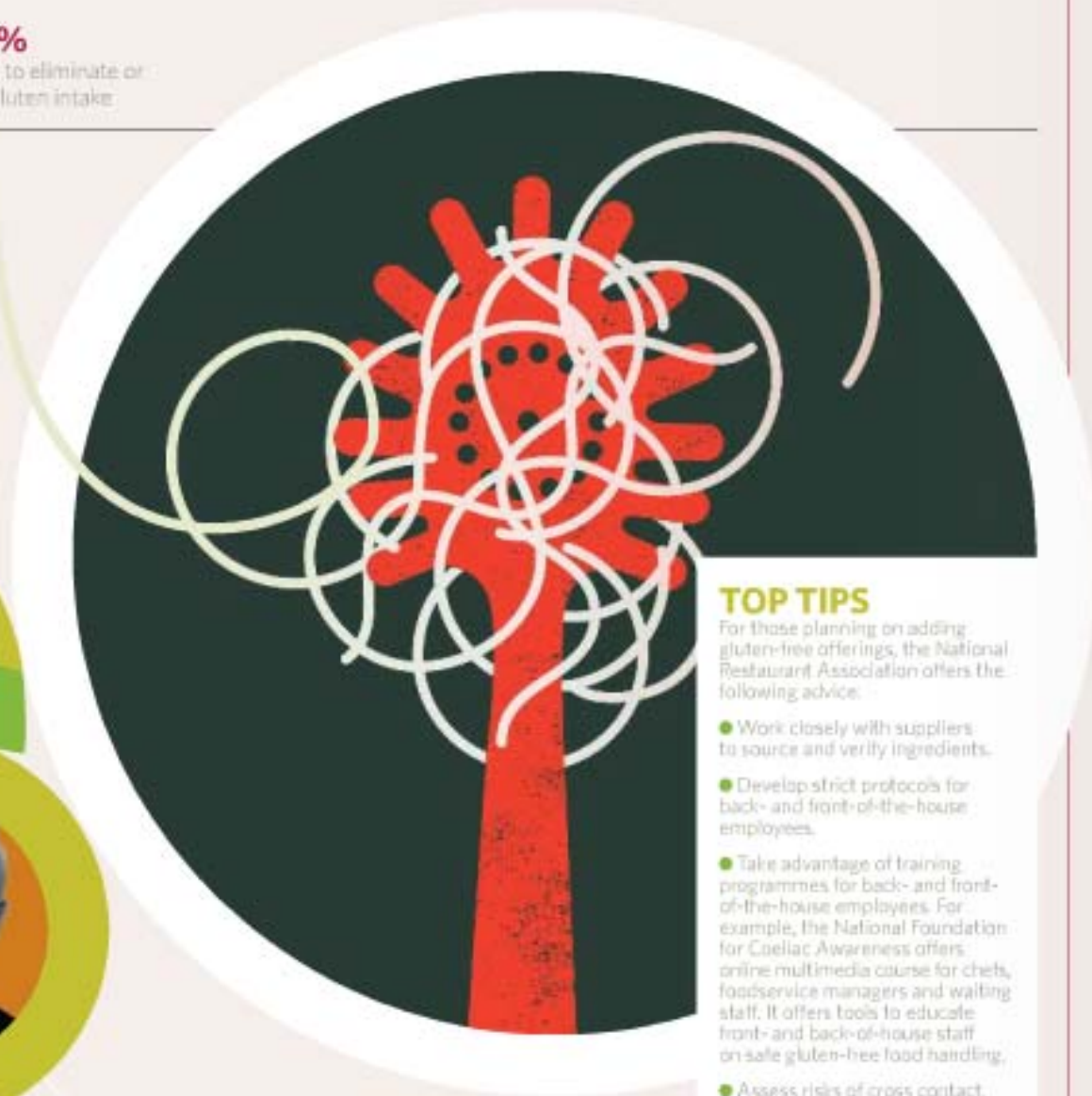
Adults who want to eliminate or reduce their gluten intake



“Coeliac disease is now a federally-mandated disability that requires accommodation standards where participation by foodservice is a requirement”

this niche – with others handling the production. Many products come finished, though some items are par baked and you can finish them off in your own ovens.”

John Cornyn FCSI, Vice President of Brailsford & Dunlavey, Inc in Portland, Oregon, says there are many who don't understand what is driving the gluten-free trend. “To start with, there is no reference to coeliac disease, which is now a federally-mandated disability that requires reasonable accommodation standards where participation by foodservice is a requirement,” for example in mandatory meal plans on college and university campuses. “Ingesting gluten could have major physical ramifications.” ■



TOP TIPS

For those planning on adding gluten-free offerings, the National Restaurant Association offers the following advice:

- Work closely with suppliers to source and verify ingredients.
- Develop strict protocols for back- and front-of-the-house employees.
- Take advantage of training programmes for back- and front-of-the-house employees. For example, the National Foundation for Coeliac Awareness offers online multimedia course for chefs, foodservice managers and waiting staff. It offers tools to educate front- and back-of-house staff on safe gluten-free food handling.
- Assess risks of cross contact. For example, having separate fryers and pots for gluten-free items.
- Seek 'gluten-free certified' products.
- Have menu items certified as gluten-free by a company such as MenuTrint.
- Get familiar with substitutions.
- Select quality alternative products.
- Look into pre-packaged gluten-free products.
- Consider adding some popular gluten-free menu items.

The best advice of all, however, is probably to take advantage of trends like gluten-free but not overly commit to them. Giving consumers what they want isn't always or even necessarily the same as giving them what they will take.