

Allergens in foodservice: the state of play

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⌚ READING TIME: 4 MINUTES

IMAGE: PETRRGOSKOV, ADOBESTOCK.COM

Before the Covid-19 pandemic struck, European hospitality had begun to focus increasingly on allergens and food safety across Europe. But as Jon Horsley discovers, there will still be some way to go to eliminate risk for diners when the shutdown is lifted.

Prior to the Covid-19 induced shutdown impacted on the hospitality industry, recent research in the UK found that an amazing 68% of restaurant staff said they needed to be given more knowledge of allergens and how their food could affect their customers.

In fact, 16% of workers polled admit they did not have any comprehensive understanding of allergies, while almost a quarter (23%) are not confident about advising customers with serious allergies about the food they are serving.

The research, from food tech company Fourth, came after the death of Natasha Ednan-Laperouse, who suffered a fatal allergic reaction to a Pret A Manger sandwich that contained sesame flour. Her parents have successfully campaigned for a change in the law to require producers of pre-packed foods to list all their ingredients. "Natasha's Law" will come into force in 2021.



Image: RATIONAL

For reasons that remain uncertain, there has been a massive growth in the number of people with allergies and foodservice is having to react. Throughout Europe, the topic is high on the list of issues facing the industry. But is it moving fast enough?

"We have a long way to go," says Anton François FCSI, who advises industry in the Netherlands. "There are a lot of improvements that we've seen in recent years, but businesses still have to improve their approach.

"There is so much information about allergens and so much technology that could help pick out individual ingredients that there should be no reason for businesses to avoid the questions of what they are feeding their customers. Yet some still do.

"Fortunately we haven't had any cases like the one that caused Natasha's Law to be drawn up in the Netherlands, but we have had several near misses and so I would not be surprised if the law or something similar is adopted soon."

Julian Edwards FCSI, who founded Allergen Accreditation, which assists business in meeting legal standards and also going as far as possible to help customers with allergies, agrees there is a lot of improvement necessary in the industry, though he believes some sectors are forging ahead faster than others.

"There's what I call the 'cost sector' of catering," he explains. "They're contract caterers in universities, schools and hospitals say. They have more far more detailed instructions for food safety, allergen safety and the like, because they have a ring-fenced customer base. They tend to have an ongoing system, which is part of the culture, so they're much more aware.

"Then there's the profit sector made up of quick-service restaurants, pop-ups, dark kitchens, street food markets and the high street. They're far more reliant on transient staff and youth employment. Because they have a higher turnover of personnel, it is much harder for them. But, when it comes to allergens, they need to learn faster and have a fully engrossed culture of training."

Edwards launched "Allerjanuary" last year, to help allergen awareness in foodservice, giving simple tips for kitchen staff and management and a resource pack for businesses in need. "Natasha's Law comes into force in October 2021, which is a long way off," he says. "But when the tragedy occurred, had Pret been up to industry standard and had an Allergen Accreditation, it never would have happened."

"Not only is it about ingredients, there also should be more training with regard to epipens and what to do in emergency situations. That is something that can be completely lacking." Training is clearly a key area, with over half (58%) of the 500 restaurant workers surveyed saying that they worry when customers ask about whether food contains certain ingredients.



Image: petrrgoskov, adobestock.com

And when it came to staff being faced by a customer suffering an allergic reaction, only just over a third (35%) said they were able to cope because they had received adequate training, while 31% were unsure what action to take and 4% admitted that they would panic.

Caroline Benjamin, director of Food Allergy Aware, which helps foodservice firms all over the world, agrees that staff need more input – on a global scale. "It's patchy," she says. "France is not great, whereas Italy appears to be ahead. But food allergies are on people's radar. I'm going to Dubai this year to help companies over there, so it's clearly on the list of priorities."

She also believes that we are moving in the the right direction, in the main. "We audit a lot of companies around the world and there are promising signs," she says. "Nandos and Center Parcs, for example, have well-trained staff. They can answer questions. And we do seem to have moved on from disclaimer training whereby staff only know to say that they can't guarantee the absence of allergens to more positive communications about the ingredients."

Another key factor is how well firms react to near misses. "The really unfortunate thing about the sesame baguette which caused the problems for Pret was that they were warned seven or eight times that this was an issue," she continues. "Different families had told them that it was sesame flour rather than just seeds, so the risk was not obvious and the signage wasn't adequate. Pret didn't do anything about the warnings.

"We tell people that near-misses are vital signs, which you must react to and do a root-cause survey straight away."

To see the full process of how things go wrong, Food Allergy Aware put on a mock trial for a food allergen prosecution every year in March.

"It helps show how badly things can go wrong and who can be held responsible," explains Benjamin. "And you can see how the food safety officers build a case from their side. It's very useful."

All the experts interviewed were in agreement that companies still need to change their overall attitude to allergens – and as the number of sufferers continues to rise, foodservice firms will simply have to devote more resources to the matter.

"They need to stop seeing it as just part of food safety," says Edwards. "Staff should be trained the same way as they are for basic food hygiene. When that happens, I'll believe we've turned the corner."