

TOP 5: Dining Out Gluten Free

WHAT YOU SHOULD ASK

Most people enjoy dining out without really having to think about it, but someone following a gluten-free diet has to research and ask many questions before ordering with any level of confidence.

Restaurants have clued in to the demand for gluten-free offerings by adding replacement products and taking steps to keep gluten out of their dishes. Some have even created gluten-free menus or indicated gluten-free items on their regular menus. Unfortunately, not all restaurants are created equally, so determining what is and isn't safe to order still requires a bit of work.

Asking these five questions at the restaurant will help you figure out which items you can safely and confidently order.

- 1. DO YOU ACCOMMODATE GLUTEN-FREE DINERS?** This is a great starting question because it forces the restaurant to define what "gluten free" means to the staff as it relates to safe handling. The restaurant will usually highlight popular gluten-free items, which tend to include replacement products, such as bread, pasta and pizza. Unless the kitchen handles only gluten-free products, cross-contamination is always a possibility, but probe further to learn how the servers and kitchen staff handle gluten-free orders.
- 2. DO YOU HAVE A GLUTEN-FREE MENU?** This is an easy question because the answer is either "yes" or "no," but it also lets the diner know how experienced the restaurant is at serving gluten-free diners.
- 3. DO YOU TREAT ALL GLUTEN-FREE ORDERS THE SAME?** People who order gluten free are commonly asked whether they are doing it by choice or for an allergy, which usually means all gluten-free orders aren't treated the same and cross-contamination can occur. Be sure to answer "allergy" when asked so the staff takes all necessary precautions when preparing your order. Of course, allergy is the wrong term, but this is how the restaurant industry perceives gluten free.
- 4. HOW DO YOU HANDLE GLUTEN-FREE REPLACEMENT PRODUCTS?** Replacement products include bread, pasta and pizza. Find out how the breads are heated, the pasta is cooked and the pizza is made to learn whether it is safe to consume. Not all restaurants follow safe handling procedures to prevent cross-contamination, and often heat and cook gluten-free items with wheat-based ones, on the same surface, without using dedicated utensils and equipment.
- 5. DO YOU HAVE A DEDICATED FRYER?** Many restaurants don't understand that gluten-free items prepared in a shared fryer can become contaminated by the wheat-y bits left behind by gluten-containing food. Fried foods such as chips, fries and onion rings are often marked 'gluten free' on menus when they really aren't. It takes more than just gluten-free ingredients to render prepared food gluten free. Safe handling procedures have to be followed to keep food gluten free from start to finish.



WHAT YOU SHOULD DO

You have your questions prepared for the restaurant staff once you arrive, but before you even leave home you can use these tips for a stress-free and satisfying gluten-free dining experience.

- 1. PLAN AHEAD** by calling the restaurant and making a reservation that specifies your dietary needs. It is also a good idea to check out the menu online, but keep in mind that not all restaurants have current menus available on their website.
- 2. AVOID DINING DURING PEAK HOURS**, which will allow the staff to pay more attention to your needs and answer any questions you may have regarding safe choices. This is especially true when visiting a restaurant for the first time.
- 3. KNOW WHAT TO AVOID** when dining at a restaurant. Suspect items include sauces and gravies, breaded and fried foods, soups and salad dressing. Eating foods as close to their natural, unaltered state as possible is the best way to keep gluten out of a meal. Highly processed foods are more likely to contain gluten.
- 4. USE GLUTEN-FREE APPS** to read reviews of the cuisine and service. A number of free apps on the market can help you not only avoid an unpleasant or even dangerous experience but lead you to a fabulous one as well. The Find Me Gluten Free, Gluten Free Passport and YoDish apps contain reviews and photos from restaurants with gluten-free offerings.
- 5. TAKE A GLUTEN-FREE DINING CARD** and present it to the server to ensure there is no miscommunication.

—Jennifer Harris