

Saving

Second chance

SAVE OTHER GF DINERS A HEADACHE BY HELPING RESTAURANTS GET THINGS RIGHT

BY JENNIFER HARRIS



Your reaction might be to vow never to eat at the restaurant again.

Since being diagnosed with celiac disease 17 years ago, I eat out more now than I ever have, and I wouldn't dream of letting my dietary restriction get in the way.

Of course, only a handful of restaurants have a dedicated gluten-free kitchen, so cross-contact is a real possibility. This can be true even if the restaurant has been through gluten-free training because of the high turnover rate in the restaurant industry.

Restaurants don't set out to intentionally contaminate food, but do they really know what they are doing when they are preparing a gluten-free meal?

If you eat out, it's likely you will eventually run into cross-contact even if you've done your research in advance and asked all of the right questions at the table.

What now?

Your reaction might be to vow never to eat at the restaurant again and to

spread the word to help prevent others who are gluten free from having a similar problem. But a better, more productive alternative is to turn this negative experience into a positive one. By doing so, you could save others from suffering the same consequences and enable the restaurant to better serve its gluten-free customers.

Here are some steps you can take.

CONTACT THE RESTAURANT

Reporting the incident is the first step, and it is a powerful one. Too many times, someone who has had a bad experience decides to boycott the restaurant and doesn't report the incident. Restaurants need to know about the problem so they can review their procedures, find the error and take steps to prevent it from happening again. If you don't tell them, then they might think everything is fine and never know they are unintentionally making people ill.

DETERMINE WHAT HAPPENED

Not every restaurant fully understands what it means to offer a gluten-free meal, so ask the staff to walk you through the preparation, including all ingredients, utensils and surfaces used, to determine where something went wrong. This includes condiments, sauces, grill sprays, oil and butter, too.

PROPOSE A COURSE OF ACTION

After you have learned what happened, work with management to prevent this situation from occurring again by suggesting a course of action. If you find the restaurant used shared butter to sauté vegetables, then explain to them why that isn't safe, etc.

SUGGEST THE RESTAURANT SEEK FURTHER HELP

If the restaurant is dedicated to providing safe gluten-free meals but needs help beyond your scope, then suggest it reach out to a gluten-free consultant who can get to the core of the problem who can quickly get. A consultant can also help the restaurant implement safe handling procedures to prevent the error from happening again. Several

celiac disease advocacy groups also have programs that can help.

FOLLOW UP

A few weeks later, touch base with the restaurant to see how it has resolved the situation and consider giving the restaurant a second chance. This is obviously a hard step to take but one that will instill a sense of confidence that the restaurant's efforts aren't going unnoticed or unsupported.

PROMOTE THEIR EFFORTS

If you go return and everything goes well, consider showing the restaurant some love by recommending it to your friends and family. Highlight the restaurant's gluten-free cuisine and be sure to point out your favorites.

REPORT THE INCIDENT TO THE GLUTEN-FREE COMMUNITY

If all else fails and the restaurant is unwilling to address the issue or make changes to their procedures, then spread the word. A little properly placed word of mouth can have a negative impact on a restaurant's reputation in the gluten-free community, so please only do this if you can't gain any headway with the restaurant.

It all boils down to respecting the restaurant's limitations when it comes to handling food intolerances. If the restaurant is hesitant to meet your needs due to the limitations of its kitchen or staff, then accept it and go somewhere else to eat.

Of course, it takes a lot more effort to work to improve a restaurant's gluten-free approach than walking out. But it may be worth it when you and others have one more place to go that meets your needs.

Jennifer D. Harris is an Atlanta-based gluten-free consultant and product specialist. After being diagnosed with celiac disease in 1997, she began educating businesses and consumers about the gluten-free lifestyle. In addition to reviewing gluten-free products, Harris founded the Gluten-Free Go-To Guide, gfgotoguide.com, to help equip businesses to meet the needs of gluten-free consumers.