



American Girl Bistros embrace gf options

American Girl stores are synonymous with dolls and accessories created in perfect miniature, hair salon treatments and excited children trailed by exhausted parents or grandparents.

But dining is also part of the experience, and the American Girl Bistro includes a variety of gluten-free options. Pizza, pasta, chicken fingers, spaghetti, macaroni and cheese, fries, cake and more are available in gluten-free versions. Restaurant teams work individually with each guest to craft a meal that meets dietary needs. The bistros serve brunch, lunch, dinner and dessert.

American Girl bistros can also accommodate allergies to eggs and dairy and offer vegan and vegetarian meals. Joshua Engel, American Girl's regional manager of restaurants, estimates American Girl bistros serve between 350 and 400 gluten-free meals per week across all 25 locations. More store openings are in the planning stages.

American Girl gets its gluten- and allergen-free products from compa-

nies including Gluten Free Nation, Udi's Gluten Free and Rich's. "The landscape of gluten-free products is constantly evolving, and we work with our distributors and manufacturers directly to be current on the trends," says Engel.

When a gluten-free order is requested, a manager comes to the table to go over the guest's needs before communicating the order directly to the kitchen. The chef, who puts on clean gloves, has been trained to use dedicated utensils, plates and cookware when preparing the meal. Items including French fries and chicken fingers are baked to minimize the risk for cross contact.

Dessert, one of the best items on the menu, is always available for gluten-free diners, and the bistros don't just offer ice cream. For example gluten-free lemon pound cake is available daily at the Alpharetta, Georgia, location.

In 2003 American Girl removed nuts from its menus to provide a level of comfort to families who might not otherwise dine in its

restaurants. While there aren't any nuts on the menu, the restaurants are not technically a nut-free environment because they do serve products that are produced in facilities that contain nuts or use shared equipment.

After the shopping trip in the American Girl store, the bistro serves as an oasis, offering children and their guests a spot to relax and refuel or celebrate a birthday or other special occasion. Visitors' dolls get a prominent seat at the table, complete with a mini place setting. The menu, which rotates three to four times a year, offers tea service, starters, main course and desserts served in precious dishes, such as flower pots complete with plastic flowers each doll can hold.

Reservations are highly recommended, and reservation agents will inquire about food allergies/intolerance while booking. The menu's disclaimer reminds guests to inform their server if anyone in their party has a food allergy. You can find more information at americangirl.com/retailinfo/experience-dining.

—Jennifer Harris

Tech company introduces portable gluten sensor

A San Francisco-based tech company, 6SensorLabs, has developed a portable gluten sensor. The device, called Nima, is designed to allow users to test a sample of food for the presence of 20 parts per million or more of gluten.

Users pop a sample of food into a disposable capsule, screw on the cap, place the capsule into the device, then wait about two minutes. A smiling or frowning face reveals whether the sample in question meets the less than 20 ppm standard the Food and Drug Administration has set for gluten-free labeling of packaged food. A free Nima app for smartphones will allow users to share their findings and search for other users' reported results.

A proprietary immunoassay detects the gluten content of any kind of food, according to the company, which is seeking third-party validation for the device. Prior to the sensor's debut, the company is also comparing its test results of samples of packaged and restaurant food to results from samples of the same food being tested by established companies using validated methods.

The device, which is expected to be released in mid-2016, sells for about \$200, and a 12-pack of the required one-time-use capsules is priced at about \$60. *Time* magazine named the sensor one of the best inventions of 2015. The company is developing versions to test for other allergens as well.

Once the device enters the market, consumers will have to figure out whether its technology is practical, especially in one of the trickier areas of being gluten free, dining out. The company suggests asking restaurants for samples before ordering a meal and using results to determine what might be safe. It remains to be seen how effective this approach will actually be and whether restaurants will cooperate. And Nima can only test the sample in question, which may not reflect the gluten content of your whole meal. For now the best defense against accidentally ingesting gluten remains doing your homework.

"We intend Nima as another tool—not a replacement for anything that people are doing right now," says Shireen Yates,

chief executive officer and co-founder of the company. "People who have celiac disease or any dietary restrictions are very well trained to be skeptical and critical and do their due diligence. And we don't want anyone to change that behavior. What we're doing is just providing another supplement, another data layer, to work with before you make a decision about eating."

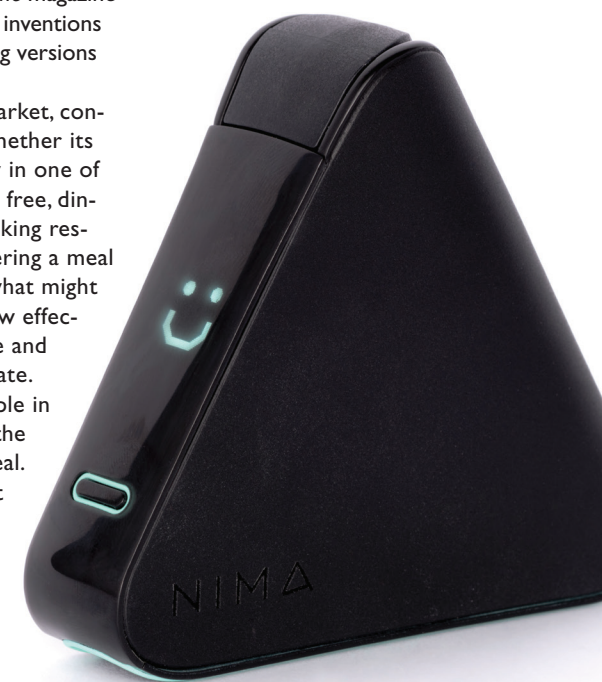
Yates was an MBA candidate at MIT's Sloan School of Management when she first started thinking about developing the sensor. But a risotto ball is what launched the idea.

"I was at a wedding without the snack pack I typically tote along, and when I approached a waitress to find out if the hors d'oeuvres on her tray were gluten free, she asked, 'Well how allergic are you?'" says Yates, who follows the gluten-free diet. "I was so tired of that question. I was hungry, cranky and fed up with always having to explain myself."

Conveniently she also happened to be standing next to a friend with a Ph.D. in chemical engineering. She asked him how hard it would be to test food for gluten. "He said it would be difficult—but do-able," she says.

Learn more at nimasensor.com.

—Jessica Press



GLUTEN-FREE BRANDS CHANGE HANDS

Gluten-free Glutino and Udi's brands have been purchased by the mainstream company that makes Log Cabin syrup, Duncan Hines cakes mixes and Vlasic pickles.

In November New Jersey-based Pinnacle Foods announced the acquisition of Boulder Brands for \$975 million. Boulder Brands, which added to its gluten-free product portfolio through the purchases of Glutino in 2011, Udi's in 2012, and EVOL in 2013, had been struggling financially, making it a takeover target for a larger, more diverse company. This is the second time Udi's has been sold in three years.

Pinnacle Foods is beefing up its stake in the health-and-wellness segment, currently headlined by its Birds Eye vegetables and meat-free Gardein brands. The company's interest in the segment is mirrored by several of its competitors. Last year, for example, General Mills spent \$820 million to acquire natural-foods company Annie's. Hormel paid \$775 million to take over Applegate, an organic and natural meats purveyor.

"Make no mistake, [gluten free] is not a fad," said Pinnacle Chief Executive Officer Bob Gamgort after the deal was announced. "This is a sustainable trend that's driven by a real consumer need."

Pinnacle plans on taking advantage of the fact that Udi's and Glutino are dedicated gluten-free brands. "Consumers who are looking for gluten-free products trust dedicated gluten-free brands more than they do a variant of an existing brand because they are afraid that there might be some cross contamination," Gamgort said.

Though he did not identify specific examples, Gamgort anticipates that Udi's will continue its product innovation even under new ownership. Existing products may also see improvements.

Gamgort commented that the company plans on retaining Boulder Brands' existing headquarters in Colorado to maintain continuity of the business, describing the area as a "hotbed of on-trend food start-up." Both Udi's and EVOL were founded in the Boulder area.

The deal was finalized in mid-January.

—Michael Savett