

DINING OUT WITH CELIAC DISEASE



Making the switch to the gluten-free diet can be daunting at home, but things can get complicated when you go out to eat. It's much easier when you have control over how your food is prepared, but it can be difficult to relinquish that control at a restaurant. This guide offers a roadmap to success while dining out with celiac disease. You might make a mistake, and that's OK – all of life is one big learning experience. You can tuck that knowledge away to use for the next time. There is certainly a learning curve when it comes to navigating restaurants with celiac disease, but you'll be a pro in no time!

CHOOSE THE RESTAURANT

Some cuisines are more gluten-free friendly than others. Many corn- and rice-based cuisines can be easily made gluten-free, such as Mexican food and Indian food. Some cuisines that are heavy in fried foods and soy sauce may require more work (or another option), like pub-style food or Chinese food. One tool you can use is an app called "Find Me Gluten-Free". This app/website operates like the "Yelp" of the gluten-free world. Keep in mind that people's experiences may differ, so take some of the reviews with a grain of salt. However, it's a great place to start to get an idea of what a restaurant can offer. The Celiac Disease Program at Children's National Hospital also has an app that lists restaurants in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area that offer gluten-free options. (Of note, restaurants may change menus, ingredients, and procedures, so always make sure to ask questions every time you go to a restaurant!)

READ THE MENU IN ADVANCE

Before you go, take a peek at the menu items they offer. Do they have a gluten-free menu? Are menu items marked as gluten-free? Is there anything on the menu that looks like it could be naturally gluten-free or be made gluten-free with minor modifications? This small bit of research in advance can help narrow things down before you arrive.

SPEAK WITH THE MANAGER

Managers are your best bet to get a clear picture of how they can accommodate your family. They typically have the most at stake when it comes to customer experience. They also have a wide breadth of knowledge of the ins and outs of the kitchen. Managers can help walk you through the menu and answer any questions you have.



ASK QUESTIONS

Just because a restaurant says something is gluten-free does not mean it is actually gluten-free. Restaurants do not have to adhere to the FDA's gluten-free labeling rule. A restaurant may offer a gluten-free pizza but coat it in regular flour as they prepare it. Unless you're at a 100% gluten-free restaurant, you should ask questions about the ingredients in your meal and how it's prepared. Here are some good questions to ask about your meal:

GENERAL PREPARATION:

- Are kitchen staff changing gloves, using clean utensils, clean bowls, pots, pans, and cleaning the preparation surface before making food?
- If food is prepared on a grill, can they wipe down a corner to prepare your food?

SALAD DRESSINGS, DIPS, AND SAUCES:

- Do they use flour as a thickener?
- Does anything contain malt vinegar, soy sauce (especially as an ingredient in another sauce like teriyaki sauce), or Worcestershire sauce (some Worcestershire sauce is gluten-free, but not all)?

FRIED FOODS:

- Is the food fried in a dedicated fryer? Or does it share a fryer with breaded food?

BOILED/STEAMED FOODS:

- Is the gluten-free pasta, rice, or other grain cooking in separate, clean water? (Do they share water with gluten-containing pasta?)
- Are clean colanders used for draining?
- Are vegetables boiled or steamed using separate, clean water?
- Is pasta water used in any sauces?

SANDWICHES:

- Are they toasting the bread? If so, do they wipe down the panini maker/grill before putting the gluten-free bread on?
- Do they have a dedicated gluten-free toaster? (While our published research shows that a shared toaster in a home environment is safe for people with celiac disease, shared toasters in restaurants have not been studied and patients should therefore request that toaster bags be used or a dedicated toaster.)
- Are there breadcrumbs from prior sandwiches sitting on the cold cuts?



BUFFETS:

- Are there gluten-containing ingredients located behind gluten-free ingredients? If so, there will be cross-contact when gluten falls on the gluten-free foods when people use the utensils.
- Are there dedicated utensils for each item? If there are shared utensils, there will be cross-contact.

PIZZA:

- Is there a separate area for preparation? If not, are they able to wipe an area clean to prepare the pizza?
- When the pizza is put in the oven, is there a buffer (for example, a clean pan or aluminum foil) between the pizza and the pizza stone?
- When they cut the pizza, do they use a dedicated pizza slicer or a clean pizza slicer?

MISCELLANEOUS:

- Are fish and meats dusted with flour prior to cooking?
- Are any bulk spices used that may contain wheat flour as a filler?
- Are seasonings, bouillons and/or stocks used that contain gluten? MAGGI is a common brand that typically contains gluten, and Knorr is another common brand that may or may not contain gluten.

BE PREPARED TO EDUCATE

Not every restaurant is created equal, and there will be times where you will need to educate restaurant staff about what you need.

Sometimes workers will confuse allergens and tell you something isn't gluten-free because it contains soy or milk. Other times, restaurants will tell diners that none of their food is safe for people with celiac disease despite their gluten-free claims. Some restaurants may even downplay your need for a gluten-free meal. And very rarely, a restaurant may refuse to serve food to someone with celiac disease (or any food allergy) due to their concerns. Here are a few short, simple ways to educate restaurants on celiac disease and the gluten-free diet:

CONFUSING ALLERGENS

- "Thanks for your concern, but milk is gluten-free. Do you have an ingredients list I could look at? That might help clear it up."
- Ask for the manager and offer trusted resources for gluten-free diet ingredient education.



GLUTEN-FREE MENU, BUT NOT CELIAC SAFE

- "I appreciate you clarifying this on your menu. Is your kitchen able to take a few extra steps to accommodate us?"
- "Studies have shown that basic hygiene can remove gluten from cooking surfaces. If someone in the kitchen changes their gloves, wipes down some surface area, and uses clean utensils, that will work."
- "Celiac disease is not an allergy. It's OK for me and my food to be in the same room as gluten-containing food. It just can't touch it!"
- "I appreciate your transparency on the menu. However, I would suggest investing in some training for your staff to make your menu more accessible to all. It can be frustrating as someone with celiac disease to see something marked as gluten-free but learn that it's actually not, and it also can make us feel like our diet is just a fad instead of a legitimate need. We would love to come back and also let our celiac community know about a restaurant that really caters to our needs!"

DOWNPLAYING YOUR NEEDS

- "Celiac disease is a very real autoimmune disease. If I eat gluten, my body will attack itself and I will become very sick."
- Ask to speak to the manager. This rhetoric typically does not come from management. The manager will usually make things right and speak with the employee to re-train them.

REFUSAL TO SERVE

- "This is really disappointing to hear that you won't serve me. I would suggest expanding your staff's knowledge of celiac disease and allergies so that it's more inclusive of people with disabilities."
- Write a review online. This may help someone else with celiac disease in the future.

If after all of this you don't have a good feeling about the restaurant, it's completely OK to leave and go somewhere else. Remember to try to stay calm through any frustration that may arise. A calm message is much more easily understood and took to heart.

SAY "THANK YOU"

Restaurant workers are among the hardest workers out there and are often on the receiving end of not-so-great behavior. Please remember to thank them for their help in getting a gluten-free meal to your table. Be sure to tip appropriately, write a review, or spread the word about your experience!

