

Post Pret Panic

Following the tragic death of Natasha Ednan-Laperouse from eating a Pret sandwich with sesame seeds in the bread, and the coroner's criticism of Pret and their labelling, it's fair to say that the allergy community hoped that the lessons learned would lead to better labelling. Currently, information on the top 14 allergens has to be available upon request. Not so helpful for those suffering severe (or any) allergic reaction to those items outside of the top 14 but at least information the most common allergies were finally being made available. Sometimes, it's not the most practical solution – to ask for the tome on allergies from busy staff in a crowded sandwich/lunch shop – but while requirements were far from perfect, it was, at least, a step in the right direction.

Sadly, it appears we are now moving in the wrong direction. Restaurants seem to be going into a 'protectionist' mode of operation, warning, rather than informing customers with allergies. We've seen this with the signage in stores and the response from Leon's to Allergy Mum UK @foodallergyuk when they refused to serve her son who has multiple allergies.

Leon's letter is on their website, ironically posted under their 'Winter of Love' decal, and states:

The idea that LEON could cause harm to one of our guests is horrifying. And we would therefore ask those of you with serious allergies, [to consider carefully whether you choose to dine with us.](#)

Those of us with allergies understand that restaurants can't have separate kitchens for each allergen, so cross contamination is a risk in most outlets. We're not expecting risk free, we are expecting risk management. Just as restaurants do when handling raw meat, chicken etc. Wiping down surfaces, keeping food separate, cleaning utensils - we need the same when an allergy is declared. It's all part of food hygiene that caterers are all well versed with – yes of course it's more work, we acknowledge that, but for those outlets hoping to pitch themselves above fast food places then managing the kitchen is part of that reputation for 'food cooked and prepared on the premises'. If you are representing yourself as an outlet producing fresh food, then it's not unreasonable for customers to expect that accommodations can be made for medical reasons, as well as personal

preference. At the end of the day, diners, all diners, like to feel welcome.

At its most simple level, we need to be able to access ingredients lists easily, have menu's that are clear with allergens flagged, and be confident that kitchens are being run in a way that protects all customers from illness – be that food poisoning, or an allergic reaction.

There are several chains that do this really well – Pizza Express is wonderful, Nando's, Roxy's Steakhouse and Wagamama all seem to have processes in place to help their customers deal with allergies and enjoy their meals out with friends and family. This is smart business because not dealing well with allergies doesn't just exclude the allergy sufferer from eating, rather it results in the entire group eating elsewhere. I do hope those outlets that are refusing to help allergic diners realise the impact, they aren't losing one diner – they are losing the entire party who will then chose to eat somewhere that works for everyone.

It's good business to make it easy for as many people as possible to eat in your outlet and reducing staff workload by having the information posted just seems like a good idea. I can't imagine staff like hunting for the binders, or holding up queues while we check each item we might want to eat. It is simply more efficient, and safer, to have allergy information on display for customers. Without proper labelling human error does creep in. We experienced this a couple of years ago at a well known chain. We asked about dairy and egg in two starters and were delighted when we were told one was safe for Molly. Part way through eating her squid she went pale, we rushed home, for her to suffer 4 hours of vomiting. I contacted the restaurant head office about allergens and the information they sent me showed that the starter Molly had was made with eggs, and the one we were told wasn't safe was the one without eggs or dairy. Human error. That's why we only go to restaurants we can trust to care about allergies, its truly disappointing when a restaurant that use to be supportive, stops.

So how does this affect us? We've friends coming for the weekend, we're off out to dinner with all the kids..Nando's will be getting our table for 9. Don't worry Leon's - we choose not to dine with you.

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