

➔ **DEVRA FIRST** SAYS ALDEN & HARLOW, HARVARD SQUARE'S NEW STANDBY, IS A STANDOUT/PAGE 14

WELCOME TO MY WORLD
CHEFS, INCLUDING PURITAN & COMPANY'S WILL GILSON, ARE CATERING TO DINERS WHO SUFFER FROM FOOD ALLERGIES
BY KARA BASKIN/PAGE 18

FOOD

| Dish | Gluten | Dairy | Nuts | Nightshade | Shellfish | Other |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|---|--|----------------------------|--|
| Skate | OK | x no baste x no butter in Veloute x no glaze | OK | x no pepper vin x no Veloute (potato) | OK | |
| Chicken | OK | x no baste x no glaze - dry w/ onion | OK | OK | OK | Legumes ↓ no peas |
| EF | OK | x no sauce x no Monte x no baste | OK | x no potatoes | OK | allium ally no green garlic * egg ally |
| | OK | x no glaze x no baste | x no hazelnut | x no vinaigrette | OK | Meat no quince |
| x no rillette | x no puree ↓ sub vegan puree | | OK | OK | OK | Stone fruit no cherries |
| 86 | 86 | | OK | x no chili flake | OK | * egg ally -w/ red |
| f veg + gluten + rec. veg te | Veg no dairy is Stock + Evoo | Only nuts on Bass right now! | Sub lemon vin for pepper vin • Potato thickens Veloute | only bi-valves (oysters) on hot line | Taste terrible Modis | |

SUNDAY SUPPER SALMON WITH LEEKS, WITH POTATOES IN SALAD PAGE 8

PASSOVER DESSERTS, GEFILTE FISH, AND A ONE-STOP SHOP PAGES 9, 17, 26

EATING LOCAL CUISINE EN LOCALE CATERING ADDS BRUNCH PAGE 21

ART
A PAIR OF SHOWS
THAT PAINT
OUTSIDE THE LINES
PAGE 3

THEATER
APOLLINAIRE'S 'BIRD'
PLAYS CHEKHOV
FOR LAUGHS
PAGE 4

WHEN A DINER SAYS, 'I CAN'T EAT THAT.'

WITH MORE PATRONS WITH FOOD ALLERGIES AND SENSITIVITIES, RESTAURANTS SEE IT AS GOOD BUSINESS TO CATER TO EVERY NEED

BY KARA BASKIN | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

'We write the menu so we can remove gluten from almost anything. We thicken sauces with potatoes. We use purees that are vegetable-based, rather than adding dairy. It's evoked a different style in our cooking.'

WILL GILSON
chef/owner
of Puritan
& Company



LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Years ago, chef Ming Tsai and his family visited a suburban restaurant. Tsai's son, David, had severe food allergies. "I told the manager that my son had allergies — dairy, nuts, shellfish — the 'Big Eight.' I asked for a turkey sandwich with lettuce. And he looked at me and said, 'We'd rather not serve you,'" Tsai recalls. They walked out.

Tsai is careful to ensure that diners with allergies feel comfortable in his restaurants, where employees study a food allergy manual (Tsai calls it "the bible") that painstakingly categorizes ingredients and possible allergens in each of his dishes. His Wellesley restaurant, Blue Ginger, offers a gluten-free menu. Blue Dragon, his Fort Point restaurant, is completely nut-free, aside from cocktails. Tsai also worked with the Legislature in 2009 to help write Bill S.2701, which requires restaurants to comply with food allergy awareness guidelines.

According to Tsai, this activism is good customer service — and it also makes business sense. "There's no better way to build loyalty than through customers with food allergies," Tsai says. "There are 14 million people with food allergies in this country. They're the ones making dining decisions. Can you imagine if a guest feels safe and has a great meal? You've won a customer for life," he says.

While home cooks may have to cope with one or two food allergies because of family members, chefs today need to understand — and, ideally, empathize with



Nebo, an Italian restaurant on the Boston waterfront, serves gluten-free antipasti, salads, Fritto, with calamari, shrimp, and smelt (right).



PHOTOS BY ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

, pastas, pizzas, and entrees including Buratta pizza (top), the veal dish Vitello Milanese (left), and the Misto

— all manner of dietary restrictions. These include celiac disease, gluten sensitivity, and allergies to the “Big Eight” (milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, and soybeans). Diners also expect chefs to respect alternative eating plans, such as the Paleo diet and veganism.

It wasn’t always this way. Chef Lydia Shire started work at Boston’s Maison Robert in 1971. Back then, she recalls, “I knew two people with dietary restrictions: one with celiac disease and one allergic to nuts. This was true for the first 25 years of my career,” she says.

According to Dr. Jacqueline Wolf, a gastroenterologist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, there’s an increased awareness of the prevalence of celiac disease, an immune reaction to eating gluten. There’s also more recognition of non-celiac gluten sensitivity, fueled by increased access to gluten-free foods. Overall, Wolf says, “Here in Boston, people are very open and tuned into their bodies. Some simply feel better when they avoid certain foods, and I absolutely believe that need exists,” she says.

Origins aside, such dietary needs can be challenging for chefs who are responsible for guests’ taste buds — and their lives too. In the best case, catering to pa-

Continued on next page

‘I can tell you right now that gluten-free doesn’t taste any different. If it did, it wouldn’t be on our menu.’

CARLA PALLOTTA (left), chef/owner of Nebo with sister Christina Pallotta



Continued from preceding page
trons with unique dining needs fosters creativity and dexterity.

"Being able to provide what guests need and want gives chefs the chance to really make someone happy who might not receive that treatment anywhere else," says Monica Glass, executive pastry chef at Boston's Clio. "As a chef in the hospitality business, wouldn't you want to provide that?"

Glass, who has celiac disease, says she keeps things "interesting" for guests by experimenting with different ingredients. "Chefs shouldn't view these restrictions as obstacles. Think of them as challenges," she says. She uses buckwheat flour to make gluten-free Japanese cheesecake, which adds "a bit of nuttiness," she says, a happy consequence. With 24 hours notice, she'll whip up desserts for vegan guests. Right now, she's working on gluten-free cinnamon buns. "I haven't had a good cinnamon bun in years!" she laments.

Now many restaurants even have menus devoted to gluten-free diners. Nebo, an Italian restaurant on the waterfront, is a popular option. "Our menu started several years ago as a personal challenge to see if we could turn Old World Italian recipes gluten-free, after we found out that one longtime guest couldn't eat gluten," says chef Carla Pallotta. "At the time, basic flour companies didn't offer gluten-free options. So we started cooking with brown rice and cornmeal."

Pallotta discovered that her food tasted just as good. "I can tell you right now that gluten-free doesn't taste any different. If it did, it wouldn't be on our menu," she says. "We did a lunch with a bunch of concierges, and half the menu was gluten-free. Nobody could tell the difference!" Today, Nebo serves gluten-free antipasti, salads, pastas, pizzas, and entrees. The restaurant also doesn't use peanut oil.

At Cambridge's Puritan & Company, the growing demand for gluten-free and vegetarian choices has broadened chef/owner Will Gilson's cooking philosophy. "Classic American cuisine involves a French influence. There's a roux in every sauce or some kind of flour component in every braise," he says. "Now, with the borderline epidemic level that gluten intolerance has become — and I have about 10 guests per night with this issue — we write the menu so we can remove gluten from almost anything. We thicken sauces with potatoes. We use purees that are vegetable-based, rather than adding dairy. It's evoked a different style in our



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

A gluten-free carrot custard is served with carrot sorbet at Clio.

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MONICA GLASS
Executive pastry
chef of Clio



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

cooking," he says.

Such demands have also helped chefs cultivate the hospitality aspect of their careers, as they perform a behind-the-scenes ballet to ensure guests' comfort. Toro's Jamie Bissonnette, who's struggled with a shellfish allergy, writes vegetarian, vegan, and dairy-free menus each day. Toro also offers a nut-free menu and a menu tailored to guests with shellfish allergies. Servers enter orders on a computer system that separates allergy menus from the rest; waiters also consult the chef whenever a patron with allergies arrives. Dishes are run to the table separately, so there's no risk of mix-up.

"We make sure people are in good hands without mentioning it too much, so they don't feel ostracized," Bissonnette says. "We want people to enjoy themselves, but we also know people can get really sick."

"We take this as life and death," says Tsai, explaining the process by which his waitstaff seamlessly communicates to managers and chefs which guests have allergies. Special menus are just the beginning: Chefs use different surfaces, plates, and cookware to prepare food for sensitive diners.

That's why it's important for patrons to clarify if there's an allergy — or simple garden-variety hatred. A distaste for cilantro or a fear of spice, claimed as an allergy, could upend a conscientious kitchen's rhythm.

en's rhythm.

Says Puritan's Gilson, "There's nothing worse than running a busy service while catering to a guest who's gluten-free — and then watching him turn around and put butter on a roll."

That's why busy chefs take issue with fads masquerading as allergies, like aversions to butter or saturated fat. "Look at Julia Child!" exclaims Shire. "She was tall, lean, and lanky. She had an English muffin or a piece of toast with butter every morning, a salad for lunch, and a nice piece of fish for dinner with a little butter in the sauce. She lived to, what, 94? Butter is Thomas Keller at Per Se's favorite ingredient."

That's not to say the chef is inflexible. Since opening the Liberty Hotel's Scampo in 2008, Shire has offered gluten-free spaghetti, which she says tastes just as delicious as her original. "We sell a ton of it, and we're more than happy to cook it. We want people to feel safe, we want people to feel cared for, and the rest of it is none of my business. Who am I to judge?" she asks. Now, the restaurant has extensive gluten-free lunch and dinner menus.

In fact, even Shire isn't immune to the changing times. "My doctor has told me not to eat white things anymore," she admits.

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