

For the Gluten-Averse, a Menu That Works



Evan Sung for The New York Times

WORTH THE EFFORT Risotteria's gluten-free breadsticks are a result of long experimentation.

By JENNIFER ROMOLINI
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JOSEPH PACE'S rice-centered Risotteria, in Greenwich Village, was never what would be called an experimental restaurant, until he began developing a special gluten-free menu.

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CROWD-PLEASERS Risotteria in Greenwich Village is a hub for people who are sensitive to gluten.

It started with a gluten-free cookie. A simple step, it might seem, but gluten, a protein in wheat, barley and rye, gives baked goods elasticity. Without it, cakes, breads and pastries can be leaden, dry and crumbly.

"It took more than 40 dozen batches," he said. "My background in organic chemistry definitely helped."

The work paid off. Risotteria is a nationally known hub for people with [celiac disease](#), an autoimmune disorder affecting about 1 in 100 Americans that can cause serious problems if even a bit of gluten is ingested.

Visitors frequently arrive at the restaurant straight from the airport, suitcases in tow, and dinner can seem like a celiac support group as regulars swivel in their chairs to talk about their hunt for food they can eat.

On a recent Tuesday night at Mr. Pace's restaurant a preppy couple asked the people at the next table about the Sicilian pizza they were trying from the specials list. Farther down the packed, narrow space, diners exchanged guidebooks to gluten-free restaurants, and compliments flew around the room about the breadsticks; the light beer, made from sorghum instead of malted barley; and the rich brownies and cookies.

At the door a leather-jacketed couple discussed menu options and waited impatiently to get in.

"Are you going to get the gluten-free pizza?" the woman asked.

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"Of course," her companion replied. "You have to understand, this is like a chance of a lifetime for me."

Like Mr. Pace, a growing number of restaurateurs have decided it's worth catering to the gluten-free crowd. Chains like Outback Steakhouse and P. F. Chang's now offer dishes without gluten.

New bakeries and pizzerias have popped up all over New York City, and restaurants that were already celiac-friendly have expanded their menus. There's vegan at Candle 79, fusion food at Asia de Cuba, Italian at Sambuca, Greek at Gus' Place and comfort food at Peters' Gourmet Diner — all gluten-free.

Gluten-averse diners avidly track such sympathetic places with online help from glutenfreerestaurants.org and the tribe of celiac blogs that include, in New York, Gluten-free NYC (glutenfreenyc.blogspot.com), Gluten Free Guide (glutenguide.blogspot.com) and Please Don't Pass the Nuts (allergicgirl.blogspot.com). Aside from safe food, they can find a camaraderie that's unusual on New York's jaded dining scene.

The pleasures of dining out are often denied people who avoid gluten because they are sensitive to it or have celiac disease. Menus are a source of anxiety and self-consciousness because — besides its presence in obvious culprits like bread, sauce thickeners, pasta and desserts — gluten also lurks in soy sauce, brewer's yeast, bourbon, vegetable starch, vinegars, salad dressings, processed cheeses and some spices.

Creating a gluten-free menu is more difficult than, say, offering [vegetarian](#) options at a steakhouse. Chefs have to master special techniques and follow stringent regulations. Mr. Pace said each menu item — pizza, focaccia, breadsticks, cakes — took six months to develop, with the ingredients costing nearly five times as much as conventional ones.

Baking can be tricky without gluten, which creates a lattice of air pockets that binds doughs and batters while giving a moist, supple texture. To overcome the challenge, chefs turn to additives like xanthan gum to bind the flour together, guar gum to thicken and stabilize doughs and batters, and gelatin powder to moisten them. Breads are baked at very high temperatures to keep crusts crisp and insides soft.

While gluten-free dining is spreading in the United States, Dr. Peter H. R. Green, director of the Celiac Disease Center at Columbia University, said it is more common elsewhere in the world.

"In Buenos Aires," Dr. Green said, "you'd have little trouble getting a gluten-free ice cream cone. In Helsinki you can order a gluten-free Big Mac at McDonald's. In Dublin most menus are clearly marked 'Safe for celiacs.' This is the way to live a normal existence with this disease. In a city as big as New York, for there to be so few safe restaurants, that's just really bad."

Cooking gluten-free isn't an entirely altruistic act by chefs. A new base of customers can attract big business to a fledging location or revive an established spot.

"I've definitely seen a spike in business," said Anthony Avellino, owner of Bistango, a 16-year-old Italian restaurant in Murray Hill. Mr. Avellino recently added dishes made with Tinkyada brown rice pasta, and dishes from Everybody Eats bakery in Brooklyn like celiac-safe bruschetta, served on gluten-free bread, and after-dinner biscotti. "When you're a neighborhood place like we are, it's always nice to see new customers and fresh faces," he said.

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