

Feeding Frenzy

Gluten. Dairy. Peanuts. Pork. It seems everyone's got a food sensitivity these days. How do you feed your guests without losing your mind?

By **Joanne Sasvari** Illustration by **Mandy Lau**

It used to be that, when it came to planning the wedding dinner, the biggest dilemma for most couples was whether to serve chicken or beef. Not any more. Now the couple needs to accommodate a myriad of allergies and aversions, some deadly, some merely trendy. No one knows that better than local experts Debra Lykkemark, CEO of Culinary Capers Catering, Genève McNally, principal planner for DreamGroup Productions, and Dan Olson, executive chef of Raintown Catering. "It's very, very challenging to deal with," says Lykkemark, who's had to handle as many as 77 special dietary requirements for a single event. "I think people are developing more allergies, especially younger people. There's definitely a lot."

Here's what they suggest when it comes to planning for your guests' special dietary needs, while still making sure the rest of the crowd is happily well fed.

Communicate clearly

Accommodating food issues is ultimately the responsibility of the caterer and/or the venue. But it's up to the hosts to communicate those needs to the people preparing the food. The key, says Olson, is communication. His sales managers always check with their clients for any allergies or aversions. "We have specific allergy alert forms that we'll post on our event orders. It's red flagged

right off the bat," he says. For McNally, the question should be included with the invitations. "Often we include a line saying 'Please let us know if you have any allergies or restrictions,'" she says. Increasingly, she's seeing RSVP cards with "cute little icons" of, say, a cow or a fish, allowing guests to tick off what they can't eat. "Now people add a little humour and a little fun to it with the icons."

Identify allergies vs. aversions

Be sure to differentiate between a true allergy and an aversion. A severe allergy – especially to nuts, dairy or seafood – can be deadly. When sufferers come into contact with even minuscule amounts of the allergen, they can experience hives, nausea, dizziness and, at worst, potentially fatal anaphylaxis. "We have to take so many precautions for that person," says Lykkemark.

Aside from those with actual allergies, some guests may be sensitive to ingredients such as gluten or dairy. Others may avoid eating red meat or shellfish for religious or ethical reasons. Others use food restrictions to maintain weight-loss diets. And still others simply don't like certain foods. It's thoughtful for hosts to consider all their gluten-free, kosher, vegetarian and paleo guests when planning the menu, but it's not a medical necessity.




Consider the chef

Don't think you're being polite by downplaying allergies: It's essential to let the chef know if there are serious issues, because it changes how things are done in the kitchen. In the case of a severe allergy, that means having a separate prep area and one chef dedicated solely to making that person's food. It also means eliminating airborne particles and physical transfer. "It's way easier to deal with a preference because we don't have to worry about the one chef who touched nuts and then touched the fridge door," Lykkemark says. On the other hand, don't demand too many restrictions for your fussy friends because, after all, what the chef wants most of all is to make a meal that tastes good. "It's challenging, especially when we want to cook the kind of food we want to cook," says Olson.

Buffet or plated?

If a guest list has a number of restrictions, one good option is to go with a buffet. That way you can easily offer a wide variety of dishes to accommodate all needs. "If it's a buffet, we just assume there's going to be a couple of restrictions so we have signs with a full description of what's in each dish," Olson says. With a plated dinner, it's best to offer at least one option that will cover the majority of the most common food issues. "We often suggest that they have a vegan choice," Lykkemark says, noting that could mean a seasonal vegetable crostata or quinoa-stuffed sweet peppers. "It would take care of the dairy option and you don't have to worry about pork, red meat or seafood either. And you can make it gluten free."

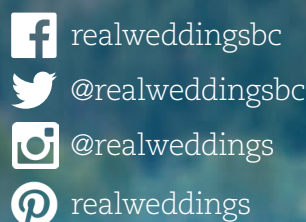
Don't forget the delicious

At the end of the big day, what any couple wants is for their guests to go home happy. That means even if you have to accommodate a few allergies and aversions, you can't forget about the rest of the guests. While no one wants to make an emergency call to 911, you can't let a handful of picky eaters ruin the experience for everyone else. So go ahead, plan your farm-to-table feast or your B.C.-wine-paired menu, and just give the caterers a heads up about the people they really need to worry about. "In general, the awareness of food and the visions couples have of food is just awesome. It's very exciting," McNally says. "In the end it's their wedding, but it's my job to make sure there are happy guests." 

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