

OFFERING GLUTEN-FREE MEALS ON RESTAURANT MENUS¹

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ABSTRACT

For many people, gluten is harmless, and a normal part of their everyday diet. A gluten-free diet excludes any product made with gluten, or for those with severe allergies, any product processed or cross-contaminated with items containing gluten. Some of the restaurant guests are diagnosed with celiac disease and can't consume food that contains gluten. Hence, there is a visible need to implement gluten-free meals in the menus.

The menu is the single most important sales and marketing tool available to a restaurant. A well-designed menu communicates much more than just a list of available food items.

Offering gluten-free meals and labeling them in the menu is one way to attract and to keep satisfied many of the guests and tourists. Ohrid as a tourist destination should offer a variety of options for the tourists with specific diet needs and that is a good way to enrich the tourist offer.

KEY WORDS: gluten allergy, celiac disease, menu, gluten-free label, restaurant

INTRODUCTION

Gluten sensitivity affects large number of people, however it is a well-known fact that gluten is part of in the ingredients and meals we consume daily. Some of the people are diagnosed, but there are many people that are not aware they suffer from some kind of gluten allergy or gluten intolerance. The owners or the managers of the restaurants are expected to be prepared and well-informed regarding gluten sensitivity and intolerance, in order to

¹ original research paper

meet the diet needs and expectations of their guests. Offering GF dishes in the menus is a good way to attract more guests and tourists in one tourist destination. For the purpose of this paper a survey was conducted in some of the most visited restaurants in Ohrid. The results of that survey will show if there is awareness among the restaurant managers and staff about the GF diet of the guests and whether the restaurant management offer (or has a will to offer) GF labeled dishes as a part of their menu offer.

Gluten allergy and celiac disease

Gluten is a protein found in wheat, barley, rye and triticale (a cross between wheat and rye) and it acts as a “glue” in many grain products, giving bread and other products the chewy, elastic texture. For many people, gluten is harmless, and a normal part of their everyday diet. But for those with celiac disease² (an autoimmune disease triggered by gluten) or a gluten allergy or sensitivity, a gluten-free diet is essential (On the Line, n.d.).

A gluten-free diet is an eating plan that excludes foods containing gluten and any product processed or cross-contaminated with items containing gluten. A gluten-free diet is essential for managing signs and symptoms of celiac disease or gluten intolerance, which are different symptoms. *Celiac disease* is a condition in which gluten triggers immune system activity that damages the lining of the small intestine. Over time this damage prevents the absorption of nutrients from food. Celiac disease is an autoimmune disorder.³ Celiac disease is a serious medical condition and affects about one in hundred individuals worldwide, although there are variations in the rate of prevalence in the different countries (Csapone & Benyovszki, 2019, p. 67). According to Macedonian association “Without Gluten” in one from 4.000 patients the doctors detect gluten intolerance or allergy, and in one diagnosed has seven undiagnosed cases (nezavisen.mk, 2018). *Non-celiac gluten sensitivity* causes some signs and symptoms associated with celiac disease - including abdominal pain, bloating, diarrhea, constipation, "foggy brain," rash or headache - even though there is no damage to the tissues of the small intestine. *Wheat allergy*, like other food allergies, is the result of the immune system mistaking gluten or some other protein found in wheat as

²Coeliac disease is the preferred spelling in British English, while celiac disease is typically used in North American English. In this paper we will use the word “celiac”.

³Hypersensitivity and food allergy - symptoms and syndromes caused by adverse food reactions/ Хиперсензитивност и алергија на храна - симптоми и синдроми предизвикани од несакани реакции на храна, Institute of Public Health of the Republic of Macedonia, Skopje, 2009, p.10

a disease-causing agent, such as a virus or bacterium. The immune system creates an antibody to the protein, prompting an immune system response that may result in congestion, breathing difficulties and other symptoms (Mayoclinic, 2021)

The only treatment for celiac disease is a strict gluten-free diet. Following a gluten-free diet requires paying careful attention to food selections, the ingredients found in foods, and their nutritional content. The owners of the restaurants who take care for the gluten-free needs of their customers should avoid all foods and drinks that containing gluten.

Foods that contain wheat, barley, rye or triticale - or an ingredient derived from them - must be labeled with the name of the grain in the label's content list. The term "gluten-free" does not refer to the total absence of gluten. In the definition of gluten-free some residual amount of gluten is allowed. This amount is strictly regulated by the Codex Alimentarius Standard. The EU Commission Regulation No. 41/2009 recommends the products not exceeding 20mg/kg of gluten should be considered gluten-free (Csapone & Benyovszki, 2019, p. 69), same as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration rules. Foods with these labels may include:

- Naturally gluten-free food;
- A prepared food that doesn't have a gluten-containing ingredient;
- Food that has not been cross-contaminated with gluten-containing ingredients during production;
- Food with a gluten-containing ingredient that has been processed to remove gluten.

Keeping a strict gluten-free diet is a lifelong necessity for people with celiac disease. The costs of prepared gluten-free foods are generally higher than the cost of the foods being replaced. Most gluten-free products are 2-3 times more expensive than the conventional ones and their availability is limited, especially in less developed areas.

Menu as a sales tool

The word menu comes from the French and means "a detailed list". The menu usually is the most important sales and communication tool available to the restaurant operator. It communicates to customers what is available for purchase, and it encourages customers to purchase items according to their placement on the menu. The menu is the point-of-purchase merchandising tool used most by customers in a restaurant (The National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation, 2007, p.40). Because of this, the menu is the restaurant's most effective, and quite often, the only sales tool. The menu

is the only piece of advertising that the customer is sure to read. The menu is a powerful sales tool if the expectations of the customers are met.

For the manager of a food service establishment the menu represents something significantly more: it is a strategic document that defines the purpose of the foodservice establishment and every phase of its operation (Kotschevar & Withrow, 2007, p. 62)..

The so called “perfect menu” must take into consideration many physical factors and patron and artistic considerations such as: equipment and facilities available, labor skill and time available, profit and financial considerations, product availability and quality, time and seasonal considerations, guest expectations, taste, appearance, nutrition and physiology (Kotschevar & Withrow, 2007, p. 113). Like a good politician, the menu planner must produce a solution that keeps everyone happy. Customer needs and desires must be balanced against the needs of the owners to make money. An ethical balance of indulgent food choices and healthy ones should be offered to assist their customers to maintain their health.

Crucial step in designing a menu is to identify the customers that the restaurant and its menu want to attract. It is important to recognize that customers select menu items for a variety of reasons, including hunger, allergic and dietary restriction, nutrition, indulgence, price, value, convenience, merchandising and experience.

Offering gluten-free meals on restaurant menus

Preparing food items for customers with allergies can be a challenge, since many of the most common food allergens (substances that produce an allergic reaction) are found in restaurant kitchens on a daily basis. These common allergens include: peanuts and tree nuts, gluten, soy and soy products, eggs and egg products, fish and shellfish, milk and dairy products. The types of food that are likely allergens should be kept separate from other food items in the kitchen. Some of them should be kept separated cause of the risk of cross-contamination. Exquisite care should be taken to prevent the menu item from coming into contact with an allergen.

Staff in the restaurant should be prepared to assist customers with food allergies. They should be able to suggest alternative menu item choices and make some adjustments to the food item’s recipe. Servers and cooks should know all the ingredients of each menu item. This will help the server answer customers’ questions about menu items, and it may help prevent a cook from adding something to a menu item that would harm the customer (The National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation, 2007, p.32).

Guests with celiac disease or gluten sensitivity have expectations of menu choices that will help them meet their gluten-free needs. In general, restaurants with gluten-free options can be hard to find. Eating away from home is associated with poor compliance with gluten-free diet, due to poor availability of gluten-free options, limited choices and restaurant staff's poor awareness of celiac disease and gluten allergy. Symptomatic suspected gluten exposure is also common in celiac sufferers often due to social occasions when individuals do not have control of food preparation (Reilly, 2018).

Gluten-free friendly restaurants make it their mission to provide gluten-free options without fear of cross-contact, making it easy for people with gluten allergies or sensitivities to go out for dinner. GF friendly restaurants have specific gluten-free menus with dedicated kitchen space for restaurants that serve gluten-free food, along with typical menu items. The key here is minimizing cross-contact as much as possible, by changing gloves, using different prep spaces, and cleaning thoroughly (On the Line, n.d.).

Many items can be easily made gluten-free with a few substitutions - like gluten-free flour or pasta. GF restaurants usually select many items off the regular menu and easily make them gluten-free and some of them offer a paltry selection of gluten-free options by creating a creative and comprehensive menu. The nutritional value of gluten-free meals provided in the restaurants should be on a par with their standard meal options. Restaurant can use "GF" trademarked symbol as a label that shows the commitment of the restaurant to gluten-free foods.

Here are some examples of restaurants that offer gluten-free menu. Seafood restaurant "The Sole Proprietor" in Worcester, Massachusetts, offer fantastic gluten-free menu (The Sole, 2022). They have it all, from gluten-free beer to a desserts. Their gluten-free menu is nearly identical to their regular menu as almost all their dishes can be made gluten-free. Another popular Worcester restaurant "EVO", handles their gluten-free menu in a different, but equally valid way. It's all one menu, with many items from each section marked with "GF" to indicate that it can be prepared gluten-free. "Senza Gluten" is the first 100% gluten-free Italian restaurant in Greenwich Village, New York City. "Senza Gluten" bring the best Italian dishes to the table using a completely gluten-free approach (senzaglutennyc, n.d.). In the Republic of Macedonia a good example of restaurant that offers GF dishes is "Paradise Food" located in Skopje.

RESULTS FROM THE SURVEY: IS THERE GLUTEN-FREE OFFER AND LABELING IN THE MENUS OF THE RESTAURANTS IN OHRID?

The survey was made amongst 15 most visited restaurants located in Ohrid. The survey was made face to face with the restaurant managers who answered the questionnaire made for the purpose of this paper. Only 2 restaurants (13%) offer GF dishes in their menus and has labeled them, and from those 13 restaurants which doesn't offer GF dishes in their menu 12 (92%) are willing to offer a menu that includes gluten-free meals. 60% of the restaurants have an experience with guests allergic to certain food ingredients and all of them met the requests of those guests with special diet needs. All owners and managers of the restaurants are informed about the gluten and the special diet needs of people who are allergic or intolerant to gluten. 67% of the restaurants has an experience with guests allergic or intolerant to gluten, so that is a good indicator that GF dishes must be included in the menu, as the survey shows that menu is the most important sales tool for almost all restaurants that was part of this survey. 67% of the owner or manager of the restaurants stated that they will feel discriminated and insulted if they are in a position of a guest who could not consume gluten-containing foods due to health problems and didn't have a food choice in a particular restaurant. 93% of the respondents indicate that in Ohrid it is necessary to introduce gluten-free meals in the menus of the restaurants in order to enrich the offer for the tourists and guests.

CONCLUSION

Gluten is a protein found in many food ingredients and it acts as a "glue" in many grain products. Many people have allergic reactions from gluten and that is the reason for their special diet needs.

Guests in the restaurants select menu items for a variety of reasons (hunger, medical condition, nutrition, price, value, convenience, and merchandising).

The number of guests and tourists that visit restaurants and have an immune reaction that is triggered by consuming food that contains gluten is rapidly growing. Guest with celiac disease or gluten allergy must be very careful in menu item selection.

The survey has highlighted poor availability of gluten-free meals in restaurants in Ohrid. Good news is that the managers are aware, and almost all of them (92%) are willing to offer a menu that includes gluten-free meals and enrich their offer for the tourists and guests with special dietary needs.

But there is a lack of awareness among the employees about the guests with gluten allergy and celiac disease.

Ohrid as a famous tourist destination must take some crucial steps to offer gluten-free meals in the menus of the many restaurants in order to meet the tourist diet needs, to attract and keep them, and to create memorable experiences in a restaurant. For this purpose, the owners of the hotels and restaurants should take some efforts to inspire and motivate their staff to be informed and trained to understand both celiac disease and meal preparation for gluten-free diets, so all the guests can feel safe and welcome.

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Appendix:

Results from the survey: IS THERE AN OFFER (OR INTEREST FOR AN OFFER) OF GLUTEN-FREE MEALS ON YOUR RESTAURANT MENU?

Figure 1. Do you have an experience with guests allergic to certain food ingredients?

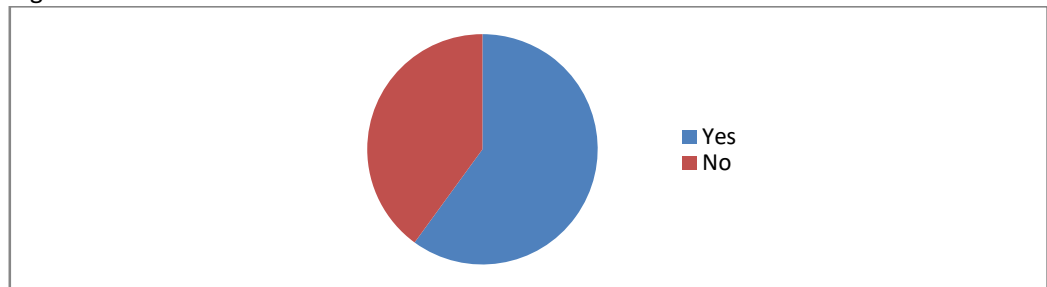


Figure 2. Do you know what gluten is?

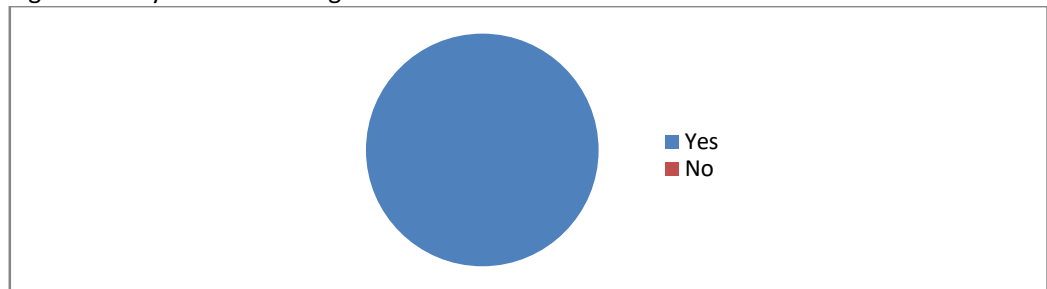


Figure 3. Have you heard of gluten allergy and celiac disease?

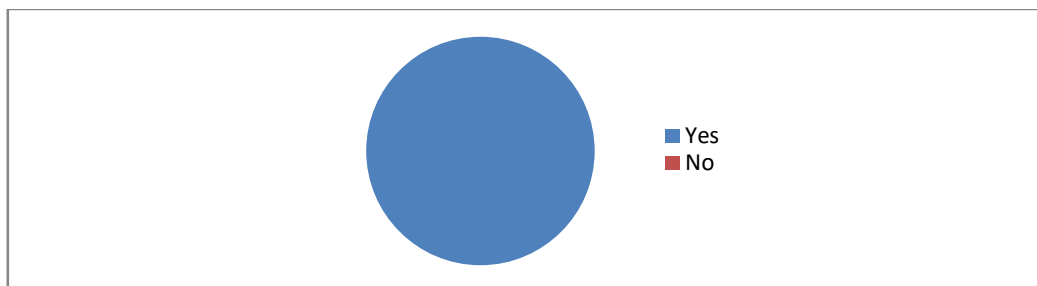


Figure 4. Have you had an experience with guests allergic or intolerant to gluten?

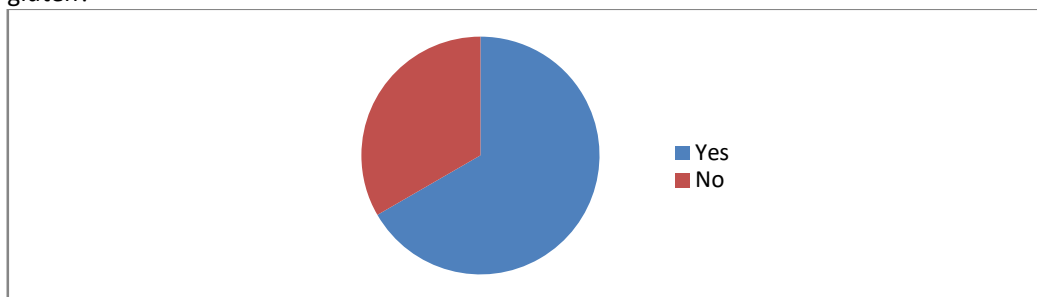


Figure 5. Do you offer a menu that includes gluten-free meals?

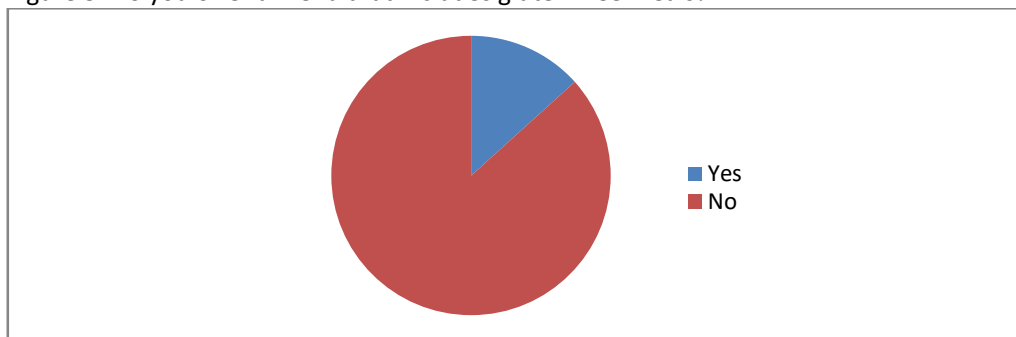


Figure 6. Are you willing to offer a menu that includes gluten-free meals? (only for those who answered the previous question with NO)

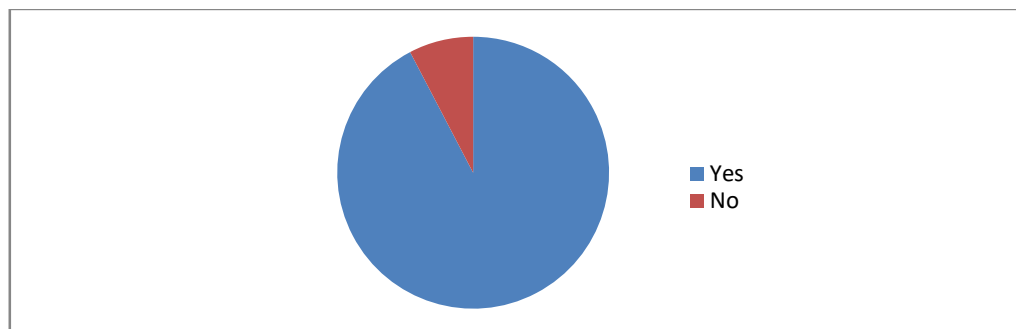


Figure 7. If you were a guest who could not consume food containing gluten due to health problems, would you feel discriminated and insulted if you did not have such a food choice in a particular restaurant?

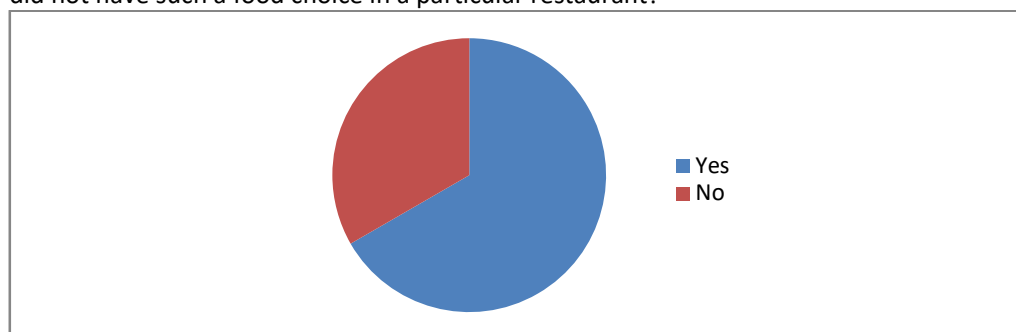


Figure 8. Do you think that in Ohrid it is necessary to introduce gluten-free meals in the menus of the restaurants in order to be enriched the offer for tourists?

