

**Bonefish Grill in *The Business Journal*, Milwaukee, WI, 8.8.08**  
Sandy Hillman Communications



Friday, August 8, 2008 | Modified: Wednesday, August 13, 2008 - 6:00 AM

**Focus on Meetings, Travel & Tourism**

## **Restaurants cook up ways to accommodate food allergies**

The Business Journal of Milwaukee - by [Elizabeth Heubeck](#) Special to The Business Journal

A growing awareness of food allergies and intolerances and their associated risks has an increasing number of local restaurants serving up strategies to avert reactions to common culprits, like peanuts, gluten and dairy.

Some eating establishments agree to substitute ingredients upon request. Others go further, rigging their registers with alerts when a patron with food allergies is being served. A few have even developed menus tailored around specific food allergies.

While a federal law requires food packagers to disclose the top eight allergens, the mandate doesn't extend to restaurant menus.

"I think the restaurant industry has been the one segment of the food industry that's lagged behind. But more and more, restaurants seem to be getting on board," said Anne Munoz-Furlong, founder and chief executive officer of the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network, Fairfax, Va.

John Wise, director of corporate operations for **The Bartolotta Restaurant Group** in Milwaukee, which owns restaurants such as Bacchus in Milwaukee and Mr. B's Steakhouse in Brookfield, said Bartolotta waiters, servers and chefs are required to attend a yearly employee meeting where part of the discussion is devoted to food allergies and how to handle them in the kitchen.

A bright pink form detailing a customer's allergies is given to chefs in Bartolotta kitchens. The chef then prepares food in accordance to the customer's dietary restrictions.

"The worst thing that could happen from our standpoint is if the waiter tries to decide what the guest should eat," Wise said. "The chefs have the best knowledge of what products are used in our food."

This emerging responsiveness parallels a rise in reported food allergies. Between 1997 and 2002, the rate of self-reported peanut allergy — the most common food allergen — among children doubled. Current estimates

by the **American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology** place the number of Americans who suffer from serious food allergies at 11 million.

Several theories about the increase in allergies exist, though none are conclusive. Some experts suggest heightened awareness; others credit better diagnoses.

As experts continue to debate the cause of food allergies, they agree there's only one effective prevention strategy — strictly avoiding the allergen.

[Bonefish Grill, a national chain with 2007 sales of \\$406 million and a location in Brookfield, operates its restaurants accordingly.](#)

[Bonefish offers an extensive gluten-free menu — gluten is a protein found in wheat, rye, barley and oats that triggers celiac disease, a digestive disorder.](#)

[Built into a Bonefish Grill food register is a button that reads "food allergies" that alerts the kitchen staff that they're preparing a meal for a patron with dietary restrictions. All dishes are made from scratch, allowing chefs to eliminate or substitute individual ingredients. Kitchen and wait staff receive in-house training on food allergies.](#)

'You can't please everyone'

Other restaurants, though their menus are heavily laden with ingredients that comprise many common food allergies, will accommodate patrons with food allergies upon request.

Patty Garrigan, one of the four owners of **Beans & Barley** at 1901 E. North Ave., Milwaukee, said waiters in her restaurant are trained to know what substitutes can be made for customers with food allergies.

"We rely on the customer to know what they're supposed to have," Garrigan said. "For common allergies the servers have been taught what to offer."

Ryan Amundson, communications manager for **Potawatomi Bingo Casino** in Milwaukee, said the casino's in-house restaurants will make dietary accommodations within reason. But proactive measures are taken as well. In the casino's newest restaurant, RuYi, dishes that contain nuts or shellfish are indicated as such on the menu.

Other restaurants may tout awareness, but their practices flout basic safety principles, at least for folks with one leading food allergy.

Consider national chain Five Guys Burgers and Fries, with locations in Delafield and Madison and total 2007 revenue of \$190 million. The chain unabashedly serves peanuts to every diner who sits down to eat, whether or not they're ordered. Like a centerpiece, buckets of peanuts adorn every table in Five Guys restaurants; empty shells litter the floor.

Behind the front counter, a huge sign lets patrons know that the restaurant cooks their French fries the traditional way, in 100 percent peanut oil.

"Our key is awareness. We make sure we have signs posted. And we post signage asking people not to bring peanuts outside," said Molly Catalano, spokesperson for Five Guys.

As for the pails of peanuts piled high on diners' tables, for now they're here to stay.

"It's an integral part of who we are. You can't please everyone," Catalano said.