



Serve This, Not That:



Beware the Consequences of Serving the Wrong Thing

If you choose the wrong menu, repercussions can be grave.

By Tracy Stuckrath

You may think it's a simple matter to plan the food for a meeting, event, or other function. But you need to put time and care into the matter. Ignoring the dietary needs of your employees, board members, or other attendees could send someone to the hospital, wreck a relationship, or embroil you in a costly lawsuit.

Food allergies and intolerances are considered disabilities and are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). People with these conditions can win lawsuits against organizations that don't keep their disabilities in mind.

The ADA defines a disability as a physical or mental impairment that limits a major life activity. In 2008, the ADA was amended to clarify and broaden the definition of "disability," thus expanding the people protected by law to include individuals with food allergies, celiac disease, and other conditions that affect their ability to eat and digest food.

In addition, the number of people adhering to specific diets is increasing daily. From paleo to keto, food allergies to diabetes, celiac disease to veganism, cancer to halal, your meeting or event attendees may well be following a special diet.

Reasons for the increase in this protected class – and the need to plan your menus more carefully – include:

- increased meeting and event attendance by people of other cultures
- an aging population and an increase in chronic disease
- kosher attendees asking for accommodation
- rise in food allergies
- more vegetarian and vegan attendees
- diverse religious dietary requirements
- growing acceptance of alternative diets
- general desire to eat healthier.

“Some food assumptions can prove fatal.”

No matter the reason, accommodating dietary needs should be standard practice for anyone planning a get-together. But with so many special requirements, how do you know if you should serve *this* and not *that*?

Know the Needs

Managing people's food requirements can be challenging, but understanding the guidelines for the most prevalent conditions can help a great deal. Here are the most common:

Food Allergies. More than 120 foods are known to cause allergic reactions when ingested, touched, or inhaled. Eight foods – milk, eggs, wheat, soy, tree nuts, peanuts, shellfish, and fish – cause 90% of such reactions. Food allergies can be fatal, so it's crucial to take these requests seriously and ensure your catering partners do too.

Medical Conditions. Many medical conditions are managed through diet. The most common include:

- **Diabetes:** People with diabetes need a diet low in fat, moderate in salt and sugar, and high in lean protein, non-starchy vegetables, whole grains, healthy fats, and fruit. It's always a good idea to avoid serving heavily processed convenience foods, fried foods, foods and beverages with added sugar, and foods with excess butter, cheese, and oil. Such a diet is healthy for everyone and will also help avoid obesity, which is another serious disease.
- **Digestive Disorders:** These disorders cause a person's gastrointestinal tract to work improperly. Many triggers for these conditions – celiac disease, Crohn's, diverticulitis, colitis, polyps, and cancer – are food related and can cause severe pain and even life-threatening reactions if people eat certain foods.
- **Heart Conditions:** Diet is a major factor in avoiding, mitigating, and reversing heart diseases. Some heart medications don't interact well with specific foods. Eating those foods can decrease the medicine's effectiveness or cause adverse effects, including high blood pressure, heart failure, and strokes.

Lifestyle Preferences. More than 27 million people follow a vegetarian-inclined diet. Millions of others are eating gluten-free, paleo, raw, macrobiotic, or vegan. The reasons for doing so can be personal, moral, or health-related. No matter the reason, hosts need to appreciate and accept these preferences.

Religious & Cultural Practices. One third of the world's population follows a religious-based diet, so knowing attendee demographics is important. Some people may simply need to eat vegan or vegetarian, while others may

require a certified meal. And some religious diets vary based on the calendar and time of day.

Planning Is Critical

Before putting a menu together, you can avoid problems by using some foresight:

Ask people about their dietary needs when inviting them. If you have online registration, be specific by using check boxes – not fill-in-the-blank boxes, which leave room for assumptions that could be fatal. If you have questions about your attendees' needs, call them. Put them in touch with the chef or restaurant directly. They're the experts on their own needs, so who better to ask? Maybe they could even help plan the menu for everyone.

Communicate with your caterer at least a week before the function if possible. The earlier your catering partners know, the more time they have to incorporate the needs into the overall menu or provide quality options. Also ensure the necessary safety steps are being taken in preparing, cooking, and serving food. Cross-contact in the kitchen and the front of the house can be deadly.

Label the food you serve with the allergens they contain.

Offer Fresher, More Nutritious Options

Chain restaurants are now required by law to provide nutrition information about the food they sell. Even so, it's usually better to order food from a local restaurant or catering company that makes everything from scratch rather than to get food from a chain restaurant. Working with local providers makes it easier to identify ingredients and make adjustments.

Foster an Inclusive Environment

The ideal inclusive environment encourages individuals to bring their true and authentic selves to work. However, most inclusion efforts don't address dietary needs.

You may be making people feel like outsiders without realizing it. If people aren't encouraged to express their needs before a meal, they may be too embarrassed to speak up when improper food arrives. Unable to eat the meal but reluctant to say anything, they end up feeling isolated, miserable, and overlooked – as well as hungry.

For example, an Indian man accepted the chicken salad plate presented to him at a fundraising event even though he was a vegetarian. Rather than cause a fuss, he ate only the romaine lettuce the chicken salad was placed on. In another case, a new intern at a nonprofit didn't partake of the pizza served at his first staff meeting. Although it was a veggie pizza, it was covered with cheese, which, as a vegan, he couldn't eat. Instead, he quietly ate his vegan

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protein bar. People in such cases feel left out, unwelcome, and misunderstood – not a good way to build team spirit.

It's the Law

The law states that you must accommodate people's dietary needs whenever you hold a get-together that's a requirement or benefit of employment. The ADA protection also extends to any events in public places such as restaurants, hotels, and conference centers. If you don't keep people's dietary conditions in mind, you can be seen as discriminating against them and be subject to lawsuits.

Be a Caring Host

As a host, you're responsible for bringing people together to share an experience. They are, in essence, under your care. You've taken on the commitment to plan their meals and their experience, and you're responsible for their well-being. Taking a few extra steps to ensure their personal enjoyment, safety, and health showcases your professionalism and adds to an organizational culture of compassion. 

As founder and chief connecting officer of Thrive (thrivemeetings.com), Tracy Stuckrath helps organizations worldwide understand how food and beverage choices affect risk, guest experience, organizational culture, and the bottom line. As a speaker, consultant, author, and event planner, she is passionate about safe and inclusive food that satisfies everyone's needs. She has presented to audiences on five continents and believes that menu planning provides a powerful opportunity to engage audiences on many levels.

“The number of people adhering to specific diets is increasing daily.”

Prevalence of Dietary Needs

- 220-250 million people worldwide suffer from food allergies
- 1 in 133 have celiac disease (90% undiagnosed)
- 1 in 18 have non-celiac gluten sensitivity
- 27 million follow a vegetarian diet
- 1/3 of the population follows a religious-based diet
- 86% of 11.2 million kosher consumers in the U.S. are non-practicing Jews

Craft a Healthy Culture

Caring about what people want to eat is part of developing an all-around culture of health, compassion, and inclusion. Knowing the law is part of it. Another element is asking people what's important to them – and listening to their answers. You'll shape such a culture with articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

Cultural Competence: What Does It Mean for You?

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Be a Better Leader by Being a Careful Listener

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Create a Powerful Culture: Wisdom from the Greats

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A Path to Stronger Programs, Greater Engagement, and Less Burnout?

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How to Accommodate Disabilities under ADA

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Why Feedback Is the Key to Your Success

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Creating an Inclusive Workplace

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