Food Allergies Holding You Back? Think Again

By Christina Botelho

There you are at the local cafe standing in line for your daily coffee, when the guy you have been thinking about for weeks has finally made eye contact with you. He walks over and casually strikes up a conversation about how the shop has switched their Styrofoam cups to something more eco-friendly. Before you know it, he asks you to dinner on Friday night and without even playing hard to get you say yes. But as you exchange numbers, you remember your food allergies and the anxiety you have about eating out starts to grow.

First dates are hard enough and the most popular date in America seems to involve dinner. So while most people are trying to decide what to wear, you are sitting at home worried about where you are going to eat and if the night will end with you lying in a hospital bed suffering from an allergic reaction. I myself know exactly how you feel. I have celiac disease and cannot eat any food that contains gluten; this includes anything with wheat, rye and barley. Believe me, I used to hate picking up a snack at the convenience store let alone going out to dinner. But luckily over the past several years, restaurant awareness for food allergies and intolerances has greatly increased. Restaurants are now training their workers on how to handle food allergic customers. Many restaurants have even incorporated gluten free items into their menus, along with advice on how to deal with peanut, soy, shellfish allergies, etc. So before you pick up the phone to call your date to tell him your “sick” take some mental notes and become more prepared and confident when dining out.

You will have more control of your dining experience if you are the one picking the restaurant; pick an establishment that caters to your specific dietary needs. There are many chain restaurants that offer gluten free meals including; Outback Steakhouse, Not Your Average Joe’s, PF Changs, Legal Seafood or Uno’s Chicago Grill. Also many restaurants such as Chili’s and The 99, include their ingredient information on their website and list all of the eight major allergens in their products. Another great aspect of chain restaurants is that food preparation and ingredients are the same in each and every establishment, so waiters and managers will easily be able to tell you exactly what is in their food.
The key is to do research before you go. If you know where you are eating, you should call ahead and talk to a manager. Let them know your specific allergen and dietary needs, explain cross contamination and common dishes that the allergen may be present in. By calling ahead you may be able to figure out something you can order before you get there, this way you will not need to make a big deal about your allergy in front of your date. You also will ensure that you have a safe meal and peace of mind before you even leave the house.

There is always the scenario when your date picks you up with a restaurant already in mind... still do not panic. You can casually bring up the fact that you have food allergies and some restaurants may be harder to eat at than others, and he should be willing to work with you. When you do get to the restaurant, ask to speak to the manager and explain your situation. The establishment should be more than willing to accommodate you, but if they cannot your date should try and be understanding and suggest to go somewhere else. If he or she refuses to leave, then they are not worth your time anyway.

Another tip is to try and have some standard menu items on your mind that are generally safe or that can easily be adapted to suit your specific needs. For instance, customers with peanut allergies have to make sure that their food is not being cooked in peanut oil and this should be expressed to the waiter. Someone with celiac disease may be able to order a cheeseburger without the bun and a baked potato with salt and butter. The patron could also order a plain steak that has not been seasoned or marinated. Chicken that is cooked in olive oil with steamed veggies on the side may also be a good option for food allergenic diners.

Communication is key when dining out with food allergies. Express any concerns or worries that you may have to your waiter and make sure that they check ingredients with the chef. Also, many companies now make dining cards that the waiter can give to the chef that outlines a specific allergy. These index size cards also list alternate names for the allergen and common ingredients that the allergen may be present in. Some of these cards will even provide menu options to the chef. A great benefit to this is that you can be very discrete while being very precise about your specific allergy.

Always be prepared to handle your allergy in case of an emergency. Make sure that you carry your Epi-pen as well as any other medication that is necessary in the event that you were
to undergo an allergic reaction. Remember that food allergies are nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed about; they are extremely common and make you who you are. Also know that you are not inconveniencing anyone with your food allergy; it is a medical condition that needs to be taken seriously. So embrace your differences and it may even be a great conversation starter on your first date!