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Gluten Danger Puts Schools to the Test

By JIE JENNY ZOU

Colleges and universities are expanding their efforts to meet the dietary needs of a small but growing number of students who can't tolerate gluten, a protein found in wheat and other grains.

Like many restaurants and packaged-food makers, schools are accommodating people with gluten allergies by having chefs use separate cookware or swap out problematic ingredients. But it isn't just a matter of retooling menus: Some institutions are also investing thousands of dollars to revamp dining halls, adding separate eating areas as well as special storage and cooking facilities.



Jeff Swensen for The Wall Street Journal

A gluten-free station at a Pennsylvania State University dining hall.

For students with gluten-sensitivity, college staples like pizza, pasta and cereal—essentially anything with wheat or some common types of flour—are off limits. Exposure to even tiny amounts of the protein can trigger symptoms ranging from bloating to anemia.

So when it came to picking a college, Brooke Hamroff, 20 years old, of Great Neck, N.Y., met with campus nutritionists to see which school could best accommodate her strict gluten-free diet. Ms. Hamroff suffers from celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder where trace amounts of gluten can cause intestinal inflammation.

At Washington University in St. Louis, where she is a junior, chefs whip up gluten-free versions of such fare as macaroni and cheese within an hour after she places an order online. "Who has time to cook when they're studying for five classes?" Ms. Hamroff said.

Unlike peanut allergies, where labeling has been the norm for decades, going gluten-free challenges schools by requiring them to inspect ingredient labels for seemingly innocuous items like soy sauce, which is not gluten-free, and to prevent contamination from everyday foods like toast or bagels.

Approximately 3 million Americans are celiacs, and an estimated 18 million more have gluten sensitivity, according to Alessio Fasano, director of University of Maryland's Center for Celiac Disease Research. A survey of 1,500 college students conducted last year by Aramark Corp., a Philadelphia-based provider of food services to over 400 colleges, found that 4% had gluten intolerance, while an additional 5% avoid gluten for other reasons, including a perceived health benefit.

To meet the demands of 40 gluten-free students, Pennsylvania State University set aside an area in a dining hall last year with a separate toaster and refrigerator. Students can

grab gluten-free pasta and bagels instead of ordering meals in advance, said Lisa Wandel, residential dining director.

Penn State, which has 14,000 meal-plan students, will add four more gluten-free areas at a cost of under \$1,000 each this fall.

The areas, though convenient, aren't foolproof. Signs advising students to handle only gluten-free foods can go unnoticed or unheeded, so employees police the area to make sure regular bread isn't used in the designated toaster, said Ms. Wandel.

The University of California at Los Angeles requires students seeking gluten-free foods to provide medical documentation to gain keycard access to a 140-square foot pantry that opened in January. About 30 of the school's 10,000 meal-plan students have qualified.

The pantry, which cost more than \$16,000, contains gluten-free foods, a fridge, microwave and toaster. Registered dietician Dolores Hernandez denied requests from students experimenting with gluten-free diets for non-medical reasons.



Jeff Swensen for The Wall Street Journal
Casey Watson, a senior at Penn State who has celiac disease.

"It's a medical need, not something that's a fad diet," she said, adding that students are particularly vulnerable to eating disorders. Some celebrities, such as reality-TV star Kim Kardashian, have promoted going gluten-free as a way to manage weight.

Boston University stops short of requiring medical records, but limits consumption of costly, packaged gluten-free foods, by providing swipe-ID access to students who use a glass-enclosed gluten-free pantry. Over 100 students use the pantry, which opened last fall with appliances costing \$6,500.

BU will open a gluten-free eatery this fall—including a separate kitchen that cost about \$47,000 to equip—that will be open to

all 10,000 meal-plan students. "My expectation is that students, regardless of whether they have a gluten intolerance or not, would be interested in eating there," said Scott Rosario, dining marketing director.

Schools typically charge students the same meal-plan price whatever their gluten status—and cover the extra cost. "We like the idea of inclusion for everybody," said Jon Plodzick, dining director at University of New Hampshire, Durham, where 60 students are gluten-free. But "the products we have to source are substantially more expensive."

To make a brownie in UNH kitchens costs 11 cents, he said. For an individually wrapped gluten-free brownie, the school pays 85 cents.

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