



Non-allergenic . . . Sahra restaurant dishes (from far left) fattoush; tabouli, humus and dolmades; mixed grill platter with marinated lamb, chicken and kafta, rice and lentil pilaf with yoghurt and caramelised onion.

Pictures: KATRINA TEPPER

Allergies make the menu

Changes . . . Sahra's Talal Alamein (left) and chef Sam Matar.

Picture: KATRINA TEPPER



Chefs are improvising to cater for food intolerances, reports SUE BENNETT

How times have changed. Cheryl Price recalls an occasion when a fellow coeliac disease sufferer was asked to leave a restaurant because the owners thought she was contagious. For 25 years Price has tried to eat out with varying degrees of success. In the early days it was almost impossible with a roast (no gravy or accompaniments) and salad just about the only option. She describes today's choices as "a dream".

But the litany of diets, allergies and medical conditions requiring special foods and treatment, has grown yearly. It's long and, frequently, complex. When it comes to meeting diners' requests, restaurants and cafes are in the front line.

"At the moment it's crazy," Rockpool restaurant owner Neil Perry says. "The number of people who come in and say they have some food issue — an allergy or they are coeliacs — is gaining a lot of momentum."

At Lebanese/Middle Eastern restaurant Sahra, in Parramatta, owner Talal Alamein adapts recipes to meet demand and about 90 per cent of his menu is now gluten free.

A restaurateur for 35 years with businesses in Brussels, Baghdad, Beirut and Sydney, he adds: "These days people are discovering all sorts of allergies and they want to know about many of the ingredients, including oils."

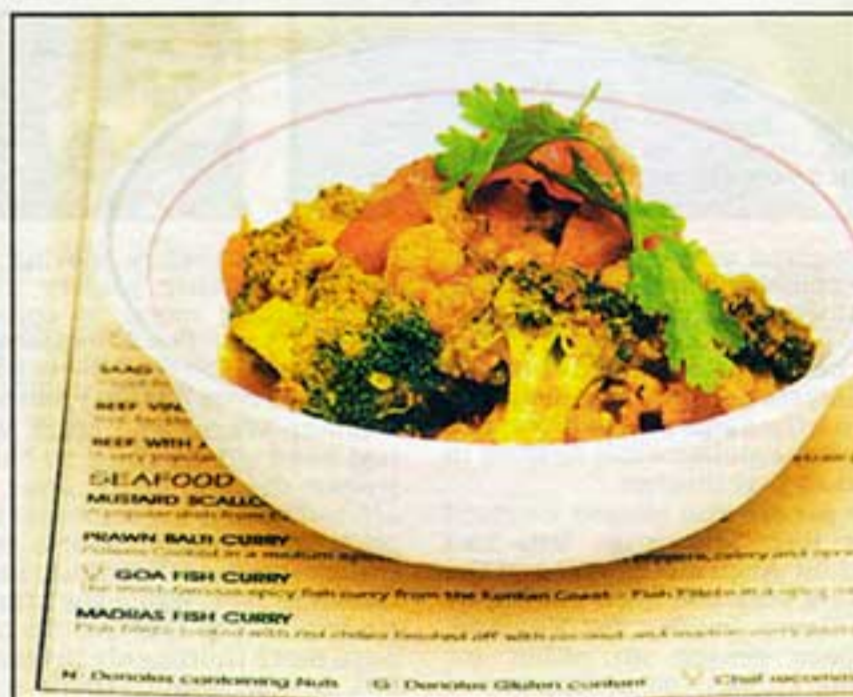
"We don't use anything artificial so we only use, say, extra virgin olive oil and freshly squeezed orange juice and we don't take any short cuts."

"We adapt recipes and we substitute some things to make the dishes gluten free and they are very popular."

At his London restaurant 18 years ago, Bombay Heritage owner Tirandaz Kermani adapted his menu for many dietary demands. Opening in Crows Nest shortly after, there were no similar



Demand . . . Tirandaz Kermani lists details on gluten and nut content at his Bombay Heritage restaurant. Picture: JOHN FOTIADIS



requests here at that time. "Down the line we realised many customers were beginning to ask about the ingredients and whether gluten was involved or whether a dish was vegetarian," he says.

"These days people have a lot of allergies and we decided it was best to break it down and changed the menu. We stopped using flour completely and 90 per cent of our dishes don't have gluten. We also try to reduce the amount of dairy."

Today, all menu items clearly indicate which dishes are nut and gluten free.

Price, NSW Coeliac Society co-ordinator, says some restaurants can still be difficult but the same applies to some customers. "There are people who are coeliac gluten intolerant but not diagnosed as coeliacs and they may not stick closely to a diet," she says.

"They will go in and demand a gluten-free meal and then eat a bread roll which can inadvertently cause problems because the chef can say, 'Well, if you can do that then it won't matter if I just thicken this dish with flour'."

"We are concerned about this sort of thing. Flour in a sauce can be quite disastrous for coeliacs."

She says restaurants became much more accommodating about 10 years ago. And the dangers, not to say liability issues, posed by someone with a potentially fatal allergy is a constant concern for restaurateurs.

"If someone says they will die if they have peanut oil, there's a big announcement across the kitchen. That's a big issue," chef/owner of Aria Restaurant Matt Moran says.

Yet there are others who astound and can annoy him.

"You get the odd one who says they have an allergy when they really just don't like the stuff," Moran says. "And



Tolerant . . . Matt Moran and Neil Perry

there are those who say 'I'm allergic to butter' and you explain there's cream in a sauce but they'll say 'That's fine'. You want to say butter is cream."

For Perry, it's the lack of warning from customers that can irritate.

"Ninety nine per cent of people turn up without saying anything," he says. "I don't think people realise what restaurants are about. Some requests are easy to solve, others are harder."

"Take someone who's allergic to garlic or onions, for instance, because there are a lot of things — such as sauces and vegetable garnishes — that are instantly out of the fray."

"It's not so bad if someone warns you but it's really annoying if people who have a major allergy walk in at 8pm — just when the kitchen is going off the deep end — and announce they are allergic to garlic and onions."

He also deals with dietary requests in his role as food consultant for Qantas.

"People wouldn't think about getting on a plane and saying 'Oh, I'm vegetarian or gluten intolerant'. There's a different attitude to that."