

Market Report

NOVEMBER 2018

**THE GROWTH IN 'FREE-FROM' FOOD
A CURSE OR A BLESSING?**



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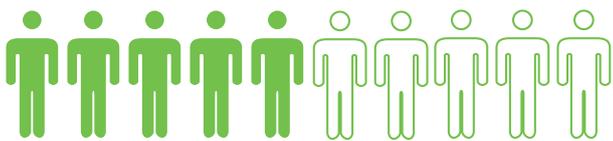


Free-From

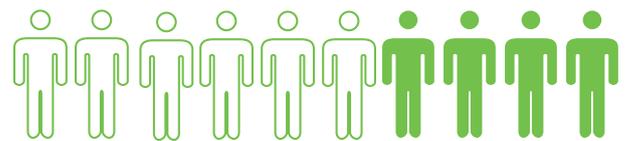
“Free-from diets are now mainstream, and operators who ignore this exponential trend risk losing out to more innovative and open minded competitors”. ANDY PIGGIN

Estimated at £718 million in 2017, the UK free-from market has more than doubled in size since 2012. This growth is set to continue, with Mintel predicting sales to be up to a billion in 2022. Concerns about climate change, the environment and animal welfare, along with health concerns in part fuelled by media buzz, has seen veganism and gluten avoidance becoming mainstream.

Andy Piggin and Liz England from specialist foodservice equipment marketing group Pro Foodservice Reps (PFR) break down the figures and examine the risks and opportunities for operators.



49% of the UK population said they avoid certain foods and ingredients



are regularly using free-from products **39%**

Recent news has delivered a wakeup call to the grab and go sector, and preparing diet-specific meals is often considered a headache by chefs.

However, with half (49%) of the UK population reporting that they avoid certain foods and ingredients, and 39% regularly using free-from products, operators that ignore the trend risk losing out to competitors.

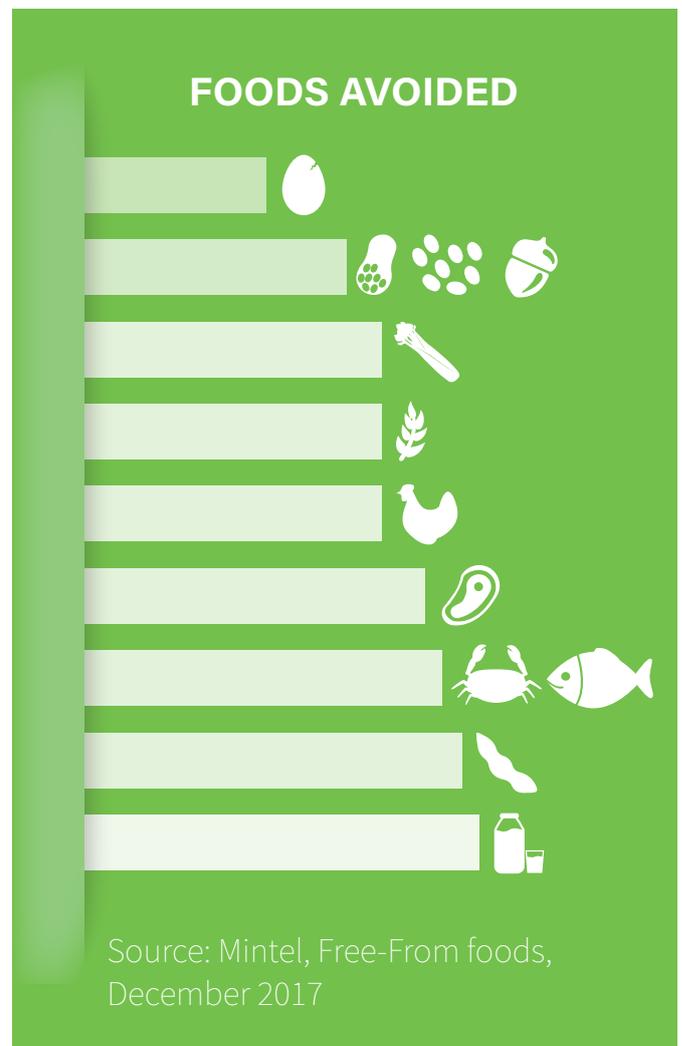
PFR managing director Andy Piggin says “Nearly every news report I hear at the moment features advice to reduce meat consumption, and veganism is now a mainstream dietary choice, with 3.5 million vegans in the UK. Two years ago there were only half a million!”

The number of people with diagnosed allergies is in fact relatively low at 3.5% of the UK population, with a further 4% reporting a suspected allergy or intolerance.

About 9 million people choose free-from products for health reasons, and 12 million cite ethical or religious motivation.

The Mintel report found that 16% of the UK population avoid eating out in restaurants because of lack of confidence in allergy standards, with pizzas highlighted as an area especially affected, with 14.5 million people saying they would prefer to buy a ready-made pizza and eat at home rather than risk a takeaway or restaurant pizza.

Dairy tops the list of products avoided by the 26 million people who said they regularly buy free-from foods.



Andy is keen to emphasise the opportunities available for innovative operators. “Operators need to ensure they are equipped to safely meet the demands of this market. We need to work together to reassure the public that eating in a restaurant or buying a takeaway is safe”.

Andy continues, “Free-from meals present a big opportunity for the sector. Margins can be excellent and free-from consumers are generally less price sensitive than other groups”.

Andy and Liz have the following suggestions to help operators to embrace the trend and take a positive approach to the challenge:

Use clearly segregated areas in the kitchen, and utensils such as **Mercer Culinary’s Allergen range**, to minimise the risk of cross contamination.

If you haven’t already, write an allergen procedure and include in staff training manuals.

Undertake regular training for kitchen and front of house staff, not only in handling procedures for allergens but also communicate the importance of treating customers with specific dietary requests as an opportunity not a nuisance.

Where possible, offer specific menu choices, not just one vegan gluten free option. Many wheat allergic or intolerant people love meat and cheese, and many people who avoid dairy products love wheat flour bread and pastries.

Include free-from options in all courses of table d’hote / meal deal menus. Nearly 20% of the UK population said they would buy a free-from meal deal.

Be transparent about your operational practices. Within restaurants, chef’s tables and open passes with the kitchen visible are reassuring for customers.

Communicate openly in your marketing. Add a page to your website and describe your commitment to allergen safety and catering to free-from diets. Make it engaging, perhaps with a video of the chef showing how free-from meals are prepared. Link your allergen control procedure. Use social media to promote your free-from menu and reinforce your kitchen standards.

Whenever someone gets in touch to book or enquire, ask if they have any specific dietary requirements. Discuss options in an encouraging and positive manner, and direct them to your free-from web page for more information.

Remember, no disclaimer can legally have the effect of excluding liability for death or injury caused by negligence in the course of business, so don’t include one. This type of disclaimer is off putting for customers and would not stand up in court . Outlining risks is different to absolving responsibility.

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