

Designing Allergen-Free, Culturally-Inclusive Meal Plans for Cruise Ship Travelers

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Basics of Dietics

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Introduction

When people take a cruise, they can expect good food, fun experiences, and an overall sense of safety. However, for passengers with food allergies or special dietary restrictions due to religion or culture, the expectations associated with eating on a cruise can be stressful, even for them, in some cases dangerous. Food allergies can often be severe, with even a small amount of the wrong ingredient triggering a serious food allergic reaction, while ignoring special dietary restrictions can also have passengers feel excluded or uncomfortable.

This report applies to cruise ships that serve meals that are both allergen-free and respectful of dietary restrictions due to religious or cultural considerations. It addresses the most common food allergies, how to minimize the risk of cross-contact within the kitchen, and accommodating the dietary needs of passengers who adhere to Halal, Kosher, vegan, or other specific diets. An example, a one-day menu, is also provided to illustrate how it can be made. The end goal is to provide safe, inclusive, and enjoyable meals for all passengers on the cruise.

Common Food Allergens

Food allergies are much more prevalent than many people are aware of and can be life-threatening if they are not taken seriously. According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (2022), the eight major food allergens, which make up the majority of allergens, are milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, soy, wheat, fish, and shellfish. These allergens are commonly found in many foods that people eat regularly, making it challenging to avoid them when cooking for others in an environment like a cruise ship kitchen. Peanuts and tree nuts are most frequently associated with severe allergic reactions, including anaphylaxis. Shellfish allergies, especially in adults, can also cause rapid and severe reactions. Some people will react to even trace amounts of allergens left on surfaces or cooking utensils (Sicherer & Sampson, 2018). As a result, it is not enough to avoid allergens when developing recipes. Kitchens must ensure that proper procedures are in place to prevent cross-contact, defined as allergens accidentally entering allergen-free food, by taking precautions to prevent the transfer of allergens through the use of shared cooking utensils, surfaces or even hands. Mocking all proper procedures related to storage, cleaning, and labeling and ensuring staff are trained in these policies and procedures will help reduce the likelihood of allergens and ensure that our guests still have a safe experience (Sicherer & Sampson, 2018; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020).

Cultural and Religious Dietary Considerations

Food is not just about survival but also about culture, religion, and personal philosophies. It is essential not only to consider vegetarian options when planning meals on a cruise but also to provide meals that accommodate the religious, ethical, or cultural beliefs of the guests.

Depending on one's ideas and beliefs, the food served could be in direct opposition to one's beliefs and impact one's overall travel experience.

Halal and Kosher are two dietary requirements that cruise lines need to consider when planning meals on cruise ships. Halal food, for Muslims, must be prepared from properly slaughtered halal meat according to Islamic law. This means that a halal diet excludes pork and alcohol, and the meat must also be slaughtered in a specific way. Likewise, cruise guests who are Jewish may practice a kosher diet. There are specific rules for Kosher meat; meat and dairy products cannot be mixed, and the meat must come from animals slaughtered under Jewish law and under the supervision of a rabbi during processing (Shatenstein & Ghadirian, 1998).

Many people are also vegetarians, and vegans do it for health, ethics, or religion. For example, Hindus often abstain from meat, while Jains take it a step further—since they do not eat root vegetables like potatoes, onions, garlic, or anything involved in killing a plant (Patel & Tiwari, 2016). Although this practice is rooted in non-violence and spirituality, it still warrants consideration in food service environments.

To address all this adequately, cruise kitchens must do more than serve a veggie burger. Meals must be labeled, crews must be trained on what a vegetarian, vegan, halal, and kosher diet entails, and if necessary, kitchens need to have separate processes to ensure that food that should not be mixed is treated accordingly. It is common courtesy to respect a person's religion and beliefs, but it also demonstrates to the cruise company a commitment to service, intention, safety, inclusion, and hospitality.

Food Handling and Kitchen Safety Practices

Taking the proper precautions to serve allergen-free meals is not only about avoiding ingredients. It is also about avoiding cross-contact. In short, cross-contact occurs when allergens accidentally mix into other foods, usually when shared surfaces, utensils, and hands are involved.

The World Health Organization (2020) proposed that the best methods to separate allergens and non-allergens would be to use separate preparation areas, utilize colored tools, and label them accordingly. This is particularly critical in a cruise ship environment, where kitchen workloads are intense, and space is limited. Another important yet often overlooked issue is staff training. Staff working with food should not only be aware of the cross-contact risks but also be trained in how to read labels properly. Even packaged products can contain hidden allergens if produced in a shared facility (Herouet-Guicheney et al., 2020). Buffet-style dining heightens the risk of cross-contact, which is why allergen-free meals should be served separately. Wherever possible, allergen-free meals should not be served in a self-service environment but rather by a trained staff member in order to minimize potential exposure. Clearly labeling items and maintaining organization can go a long way in protecting guests.

Sample Allergen-Free Day Menu

This is an example of a one-day menu that is free from all main allergens and caters to guests who prefer Halal, Kosher, vegetarian, and vegan diets. The menu items are straightforward and nutritious and can be easily prepared in a cruise ship kitchen.

Breakfast: Quinoa porridge with oat milk spiced with berries and chia seeds, served with melon and mint tea.

Snack: Rice cakes with sunflower seed spread, cucumber slices, and coconut water.

Lunch: Grilled chickpea and lentil patty with steamed spinach and brown rice, accompanied by lemon-tahini sauce and fresh orange wedges.

Snack: Roasted chickpeas and dried apple slices.

Dinner: Sweet potato and lentil stew served with gluten-free flatbread, pickled vegetables, and sparkling water with lime.

Conclusion

Serving meals that are compatible with cultural practices and allergen-free onboard a cruise should be considered more than a nice perk of cruising; it is a requirement for passenger safety and inclusivity. To accommodate dietary needs and restrictions, there are training programs, food handling processes, and procedures involved, allowing anybody to successfully cater to a variety of dietary requirements while providing safe and high-quality food. As a cruise line, with anyone's attention to detail in labeling food, safe food handling processes in the kitchen, and meal design, anyone will provide a better experience for guests, regardless of their background or dietary restrictions.

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