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AN APPETITE FOR GLUTEN-FREE FOOD

IT IS NOT ONLY SPECIALITY EATERIES THAT ARE SERVING DISHES FOR THE GLUTEN-INTOLERANT

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The trend may have taken off in the United States, but across the Pacific, a push for gluten-free foods is slowly but surely gaining momentum.

The idea of a gluten-free diet has become somewhat fashionable, even among non-sufferers — perhaps in the same way our love for kale and quinoa has grown.

This can be seen as more restaurants here — and not only health-food eateries and speciality stores — grow more resolute in their efforts to provide for those who are gluten intolerant.

Take Open Door Policy (ODP) by the Spa Esprit Group (SEG), which is the first modern bistro in Singapore to offer contemporary comfort dishes that are 100 per cent gluten- and dairy-free. This is a recent and complete overhaul of the menu, and an initiative inspired by the few and limited offerings on the market, said an SEG spokesman.

After much research, its chefs Ryan Clift and Daniele Sperindio have come up with a menu that should surprise even the non-gluten intolerant, proffering dishes such as the vegan macaroni pasta with portobello bolognese gra-

tin, which tastes like a lighter version of mac and cheese. These dishes are the kind that reflect ODP's signature style of comfort cooking and yet are completely gluten- and dairy-free.

Fermentation is a key technique used to bring out the desired flavour profile, which also means the food here is probiotic, and why diners will not feel bloated, Sperindio explained.

The macaroni dish for example involves a variation of fermentation techniques and temperature treating with ingredients such as nutritional yeast. Nutritional yeast, a component that is already popular in vegan cooking, is used to achieve the flavours of cheese and butter. For the flavour and texture of the sauce, portobello mushrooms are used as a substitute.

Fat is also replaced with extra virgin coconut oil, and dairy is replaced with house-made almond milk and soy milk. Corn starch and arrowroot powder are used to replace all the flour to help the team achieve the effect of an all-purpose flour.

The dishes prove that gluten-free dishes do not have to be limited to pompous bowls of superfoods dressed in a hodgepodge of gourmet accoutrements. Gluten is, after all, limited to a select group of foods, such as bread and pastries (especially those made with wheat flour), malt beverages, salad dressings and some soy sauce (such as those made with malt), and

types of noodles (those made purely with rice flour or buckwheat are fine).

DELECTABLY WHOLESOME

"Gluten-free diets may have become popular in recent years as the latest fad diet to potentially shed excess weight, but most people may not necessarily have to avoid this protein," said certified health coach Melody Chong, who had studied at the Institute for Integrative Nutrition in the US.

The only ones who should be con-

Saint Pierre's cod and oxtail consomme reflects the restaurant's renewed focus on healthier and gluten-free dining.

cerned with avoiding gluten, she said, are those with celiac disease and gluten sensitivity. "The former is an auto-immune condition, while gluten sensitivity is related to a body reaction to gluten."

She warned that while this diet choice has become a trendy diet in Singapore, with people thinking it will help them lose weight, not all gluten-



What you need to know about going gluten-free

1. Those with celiac disease will have to keep to a lifelong strict gluten-free diet.
2. Those with symptoms of celiac disease — such as weight loss, stomach pains and gastrointestinal complications — but tested negative for celiac are potentially gluten sensitive.
3. Other symptoms of gluten sensitivity include fatigue and headaches. Symptoms have been shown to improve with gluten-free diets.

Jaclyn Reutens is a dietitian with Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants (Tel: 6836 9004; <http://www.aptima-nsc.com>)

4. People who think they have gluten sensitivity should test for celiac first. They can then get the proper medical attention and keep to a prescribed diet.
5. Gluten sensitivity is harder to test but gluten-free diets can help. The difference between celiac disease and gluten sensitivity is that the latter does not damage the intestine.
6. The principles of a gluten-free diet remove a wide variety of wholegrains that are high in vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre, so those who have a lifelong adherence to it should consult a dietitian to ensure they do not become deficient in any of the nutrients.

free foods are created equal or with weight-loss in mind.

"The manufactured gluten-free items with long shelf lives are the key ones to avoid — they may not be enriched but are often higher in sugar and starches, for example," Chong pointed out.

"I usually prepare my own meals at home, and they are often gluten-free. But on days when I feel like eating out at a restaurant, I have a few go-to places, such as The Living Cafe on Sixth Avenue, Sunny Choice at the Rail Mall and Cedele, for my gluten-free fix." She explained how they would use lettuce leaves to replace buns in their "burgers", dehydrated flax vegetable for the pizza crust, and zucchini strips to make the "lasagne".

ONLY NATURAL

Chong pointed out how most foods are naturally gluten-free. Which is exactly what more restaurants, such as Angela May Food Chapters, have focused their efforts on, providing wholesome yet delicious options where possible. "We offer a lot of gluten-free items on the menu, but these items are naturally gluten-free," May affirmed. "I haven't removed gluten or substituted it in any dish."



For instance, the white bean puree in her main dish of pork collar, she said, provides more protein and flavour, but is made with only Italian white beans and olive oil. She shared that she has seen more diners asking for gluten-free dishes, but added that there would be no need to replace any of the ingredients in her dishes to satisfy diners who do not suffer from gluten sensitivity.

Chef Emmanuel Stroobant also noted an increase in the demand for gluten-free dishes, which is why his team at restaurant Saint Pierre conceived the menu with the idea of being able to offer a gluten- or dairy-free option for pretty much every dish. "We

Quinoa salad with fermented root vegetables from Open Door Policy's new gluten- and dairy-free menu.

PHOTO: DOMMENDOZA

have at least two gluten-free requests per week and only occasional requests for dairy-free (dishes)," he added.

"Aside from the bread, 95 per cent of the menu at Saint Pierre is gluten-free. As such, it is difficult to list the most popular items, but I would say that our lobster (with veal jus and braised ce-

leriac) and the cod dishes (such as cod in oxtail consomme) are very popular."

Suffice it to say, the popularity of gluten-free dining has outgrown its principal function, winning fans across a range of discerning diners — from the healthy eater to the fussy gourmand.

More places to get your gluten-free fix

Open Door Policy

(19 Yong Siak Street, tel: 6221 9307)

Open Door Policy's 100 per cent gluten- and dairy-free menu was made available last week and is slated to be officially launched this week. Highlights include a vegan mac and cheese pasta made with portobello bolognese, gratin and bechamel, sans the use of cream, cheese or beef. There is also a crab agnolotti with saffron and corn sauce and sugar snap peas, and a rustic tapioca and borlotti beans soup served with tomato and warm bread. Yes, the bread is also gluten-free.

Angela May Food Chapters

(Robinsons The Heeren #02-02, 260 Orchard Road, tel: 6681 7440)

Dishes here reflect the way the chef-owner likes to eat, while the menu was created so that diners of varied dietary restrictions could still have a meal together. Dishes such as the pork collar and white beans, and red mullet with hand-cut coconut noodles in a lemongrass-coconut cream, were created with specifically the gluten-intolerant in mind, as was the dessert of chilled coconut chia pudding served with fresh berries and a drizzle of gula melaka.

Afterglow

(24 Keong Saik Road, tel: 6224 8921)

It does not only champion fresh, wholesome food with a focus on raw food and artisan products from around the globe. This farm-to-table menu also boasts mains that gluten-sensitive diners can revel in. The "deconstructed sushi bowl" for instance pairs black rice with seasonal pickles, shitake mushrooms, avocado, nori and a mild wasabi dressing. There is also a "raw zucchini linguine" with walnut "meat" balls, as well as a "raw crispy lasagne" made with zucchini sheets, macadamia nut cream cheese, pine nuts and mixed herbs pesto, crispy dehydrated cherry tomatoes, marinated baby spinach and shitake mushroom.



Angela May's pairing of pork collar and Italian white beans is full of flavour and texture, and free from gluten.

The Providore

(Mandarin Gallery, tel: 6732 1565; PasarBella, tel: 6468 9766; and Tangs, tel: 6235 1425)

This week, a full range of gluten-free breads, cakes and pastries from Jonathan's, possibly Singapore's first purely gluten-free kitchen, will be available at The Providore's PasarBella Singapore stores over the weekend, and as a permanent fixture at its cafe outlets. This is a lot rarer than one might think as such bakes need to be made at a certified factory to avoid cross contamination, said the staff. As such, breads on the menu can be substituted with gluten-free bread on request. Choices for the main course include the bomba paella rice with Iberico chorizo, selected seafood, and the pan-seared ocean trout served with organic "energy rice" and beetroot relish.

Saint Pierre

(#02-02B One Fullerton, 1 Fullerton Road, tel: 6438 0887)

Save for the bread, more than 90 per cent of the menu at the revitalised restaurant is gluten-free. It

also helps that it offers a vegan and a vegetarian menu as well. And although requests for dairy-free products happen less often, it helps that the restaurant's "essence-centric cuisine" does not feature large amounts of dairy to begin with. Here the tomato with white balsamic sorbet, and the pigeon dish would be good choices.

Zafferano

(Level 43-01, 10 Collyer Quay, tel: 6509 1488)

Most of its signature items on the a la carte menu are recommended to diners with gluten-free and dairy-free requests, said restaurant manager Paolo Colzani. These include the risotto with langoustine and Iranian saffron (gluten-free), and poached then pan-seared Sardinian octopus with seasonal vegetables (gluten- and dairy-free). And because many customers have asked for it, the kitchen also does gluten-free pasta (such as spaghetti) that diners can have with their preferred sauce. The popular choice is to have it with fresh tomatoes and mixed seafood.