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FOODS MATTER



Dining in Disneyland

The ONLY
magazine
for allergy



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Loretta Jay and her two children are both coeliac; the children are also allergic to milk, soy, nuts, rice and sorghum – so travelling is challenging, but enjoyable. Many readers will remember Loretta's article (FM May 08) on how to absorb local food culture when on a restricted diet.

The Jay family's latest expedition was to Disney Orlando and, below, Loretta reports on what they found.

Coincidentally, Foods Matter subscriber Sharon Steinman and her family were also in Orlando and, overleaf, Sharon shares their experiences.

Our family of four packed light for this vacation. We still took the requisite hummus and plantain chips, and a supply of casein and soy-free tuna. But it was much less than we usually take on a week-long trip. We were going to Disney World! Disney: a word synonymous with Mickey Mouse and fun. But what does it mean for a family with medically necessary food restrictions? Disney parks abound throughout the world: Magic Kingdom was the first established in 1971 in Orlando, Florida. Over the years additional parks opened in Los Angeles, Paris and Tokyo. There are even Disney cruise ships. Each location's food service department is managed separately, challenging those with food restrictions.

As always, people with food allergies or restrictions must take extra care planning when away from home. A trip to Disney is no exception. Throughout the parks there are street vendors, quick service cafeterias and sit-down restaurants. Successfully eating around requires one to be alert to each venue's kitchen hierarchy.

Disney recognises that a large number of people who visit their parks have food allergies

In fact, thousands of special dietary meals are prepared each month, and managers and chefs have been trained to accommodate these guests. If necessary, or if preferred, food that does not require reheating can be brought into the parks. At security, disclose the food to the inspectors and let them know that someone in your group has a food allergy.

On the first day in the park I didn't want to be stuck so we brought all of our snacks and meals. Three of us have coeliac disease and both children are allergic to milk, soy, nuts, rice and sorghum. I dedicated some time on that first day to researching food options and determining what our choices were. We brought some food on the other days to supplement purchased items.

Planning Ahead

Disney recommends that visitors with medically restricted diets make restaurant reservations three days in advance. This is a good idea for all visitors, as most of the sit-down restaurants book up early; it is rare to get a reservation for the same day. When making the reservation, be sure to mention all food restrictions. This information is entered into the com-

puter system and conveyed to the chef and kitchen staff.

When the kitchen has prior notice, gluten-free pancakes or waffles, dinner rolls and sandwich bread are available. Soy and rice milk are typically available at all times, as is rice pasta, but treats like cake or dairy-free ice cream may need to be ordered. The chefs take this responsibility seriously, and when one gets to the restaurant the host will notify the chef that the guest with the special diet has arrived and the chef will make a visit to the table to facilitate the order-selection.

Some resorts carry a special line of ready-made allergen-free food. At Disney Paris, the special meals are made by Natama. Meals include appetisers, main courses and desserts and none of the top eight allergens is used. They are packaged like a TV dinner so there is no risk of cross-contamination. The ingredients of the different meal choices can be found at the website, listed under Disneyland Resort Paris, in the accompanying sidebar.

Disney Cruise Lines will also accommodate special diets, which is a good thing since only commercially prepared, packaged food may be brought onto the ships. When making reser-

vations mention any allergies or intolerances. The kitchens are accustomed to providing gluten-free meals, but still require lead time to prepare. Guests with multiple or life-threatening allergies will be asked to complete a medical information form; the cruise line will typically follow up with a phone call. As part of the research for this article I inquired as to whether the cruise ships' kitchens would be able to manage my children's restricted diet. They assured me that they would in the dining rooms only, but food such as breads or desserts may not be available. This could be problematic, particularly for children. I would recommend thoroughly exploring how all meals and snacks will be provided for those with multiple or less common allergens such as corn or rice.

On the Go

Our family tends to be spontaneous when we travel. Sometimes it is nice to take it easy and head to the pool rather than dealing with the crowds at the park. Or if Donald Duck is out and signing autographs, we've just got to wait in line to give him a hug. Scheduling meals became a bigger challenge than finding safe food. Take-out (cafeteria style) restaurants and street vendors offered meals without the need to plan ahead.

Throughout the parks, chefs and managers were knowledgeable and accommodating, and we found ourselves eagerly anticipating the next meal. The selection of safe foods was limited, but there were some options. I had a gluten-free Goat Cheese with Roasted Beets salad at Sunshine Seasons in Epcot. It was to die for!



Goat cheese with roasted beets

Because the tongs at the salad station may have touched a gluten-containing item, the chef made a customised salad with ingredients in the kitchen, addressing cross-contamination concerns.

The co-ordinators and managers at the Disney cafeterias use a reference manual that lists ingredients, but it does not address food that is manufactured on shared lines with other allergens. If someone is very sensitive and avoids shared processing lines then additional label reading is needed. Stacey, a co-ordinator at Magic Kingdom's Cosmic Ray's Starlight Café, explained that all managers and co-ordinators must attend five different training classes before they may help a guest with food allergies. And Stacey's training paid off. She was attentive to our numerous allergies, and patiently helped me find safe substitutes: pork ribs without the sauce, steamed green beans without seasoning or butter, and baked French fries! The fries took about ten minutes to prepare, and were so greasy and tasty that I went back to make sure that they really were the specially prepared baked ones. They were.

As with most dining-out, allow a little extra time to liaise with the kitchen staff and have the food specially prepared. Cashiers are not trained in food allergy management, so be sure to communicate with the co-ordinator or manager. And double-check and clarify for safety.

Self-advocacy

At Walt Disney World, Disney provided a 'Dietary Request Reference Sheet'. Initially I was delighted to see it but soon realised that it was incomplete and misleading. For example, the list identifies the popcorn (Orville Redenbacher) and popping oil (a coconut, corn and canola blend) that is used by the vendors, and notes that the oil

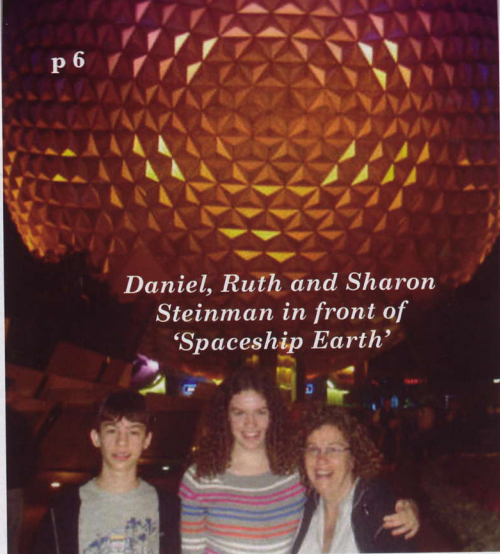


Six-year-old Mickey and seven-year-old Ellie with their french fries.

manufacturer also produces peanut oil. This is great information, as many people with an allergy to peanuts may choose to avoid this product due to the risk of cross-contamination. Those with a tree nut allergy would be wise to stay away since coconut oil is used. But the list fails to mention that a butter (milk) mixture flavours the popcorn. It was only through questioning the vendors that I learned this.

Cross-contamination is also not addressed by the list. My kids were thrilled at the prospect of eating French fries. The coating on the fries and the oil used to fry them are identified on the Reference Sheet and appeared safe. But a few enquiries later I learned that breaded (wheat) chicken is fried in the same oil, thus contaminating the otherwise allergen-free food. Had we eaten the standard fries it could have spoiled the rest of the trip.

The lesson is that it's always smart to use your 'allergy sense', ask questions and view the product before trusting that a food is safe. For instance turkey legs are available throughout the parks in the United States but at Epcot they were kept in the same cart, and below pretzels. A sprinkling of salt and pretzel crumbs covered the turkey legs, making them



Daniel, Ruth and Sharon Steinman in front of 'Spaceship Earth'

Prior to our trip to Orlando I researched extensively as, not only are we gluten and lactose free but we keep a kosher diet.

We stayed in an apartment resort recommended by a friend so that we could self-cater and have an equipped kitchen. The resort was stunning with seven swimming pools and 12 tennis courts! The apartment was superb and incredibly well equipped. The kitchen had everything you could need –

electric tin opener, liquidiser and coffee maker to say nothing of the dishwasher, washing machine, tumblers dryer, three LCD TVs, six sinks and a double Jacuzzi in the middle of the bedroom. I could not recommend it enough.

Staying in a resort hotel is probably not the cheapest option but across Orlando and districts there are many villas for rent either via agents or direct with the owners, which could give you superb facilities without the added resort expenses.

Disney planning

Prior to travelling I was in e-mail communication with Walt Disney resort guest services to ascertain how geared up they were for special diets. Having emailed them it took a very long

time to get any sort of reply – which passed me to another department via a link which did not work. It took Disney two weeks to tell me that the link they had given me was now obsolete and provide me with another e-mail address. Again their responses were slow. So my advice for anyone wanting specific food information would be to plan well in advance.

On site

Having finally ascertained that they could feed us a gluten and lactose free, kosher meal we decided to wait until we were in Florida to book as we needed to be specific about which restaurant in which Park and at what time when ordering special meals. Although Disney confirmed you can make reserva-

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by Loretta Jay – continued:

unsafe for someone with an egg, milk or wheat allergy or coeliac disease.

I followed up with Joel Schaefer, the chef in charge of special diets at Walt Disney World. He said the reference sheet is intended to be a guide, and that the consumer needs to take proper precautions. He also recommended that people with severe allergies stay clear of the outdoor vendors so that a chef or manager may guide them.

Eating on the go at Disney requires detective work and persistence to ensure that accurate information is obtained, and the food your family eats is safe. Everyone who works at Disney is eager to please, which may lead to someone giving incorrect

information, or else foster a false sense of security. It's great that Disney has done the leg-work; the basics – topics like cross-contamination and hidden ingredients – are already part of its vocabulary in the sit-down restaurants. But whether at Disney or elsewhere, the rules remain the same: taking responsibility for your own health means evaluating the environment for yourself no matter what you are told.

The following phone numbers and website addresses are available for Special Dietary Requests at Disney resorts around the world.

Walt Disney World

Orlando, Florida, USA
<http://tinyurl.com/7ar3hg>
 (407) WDW-3463

Disneyland
Los Angeles/Anaheim
California, USA
 (714) 781-3463
www.disneyland.disney.go.com

Disney Cruise Lines
 (800) 951-3532
www.disneycruise.disney.go.com

Disneyland Resort Paris
 +33 (0) 1 60 30 40 50
<http://tinyurl.com/a7ouw9>

Tokyo Disney Resort
 Reservations Center
 +81-45-683-3333
www.tokyodisneyresort.co.jp