



Shoppers with food allergies and intolerances are actively seeking solutions in supermarkets. Good merchandising can help them.

# Healthy appetites

BY CAROL RADICE



**G**IVEN THE STATISTICS, THERE IS A GOOD CHANCE THAT MOST PEOPLE KNOW SOMEONE WHO SUFFERS FROM A FOOD ALLERGY or intolerance, even if they don't have one themselves. And that has begun to lead to a broader understanding of the frustrations involved in finding products the sufferers can consume without health repercussions.

Product labels are often unclear, sometimes giving the impression that a medical degree is necessary to understand them. Scanning a label for the word "gluten," for example, will not necessarily tell a consumer whether any wheat derivatives are among the ingredients. If a product is flagged "gluten-free," the label doesn't necessarily indicate whether it contains grains that are safe for people with celiac disease.

Voluntary labeling guidelines exist in some cases, but more formal standards are just now being created. In view of the lack of consensus among the major support groups in the United States, Canada and Europe as to what the definition of gluten-free should be, the U.S. is not expected to have its standard completed until August 2008. Other countries, including Canada, have already adopted their own defini-

tion and use a flat standard of 20 parts per million for all foods that include the term "gluten-free" on their labels.

Complicating the effort, according to some, is the possibility that the regulations now being adopted by different countries will conflict with each other, which could have a negative effect on the import and export of gluten-free products.

Although wheat and gluten allergies and intolerances are receiving the lion's share of attention these days, experts say there are at least eight major foods that frequently cause a reaction when eaten. "Food allergies and intolerances are serious issues and shouldn't be lumped into the same category as someone who is finicky or picky," says Maryellen Molyneaux, president of the Natural Marketing Institute in Harleysville, Pa. "The reality is people today are much more aware of how allergens affect them. And in fact children are among those who are increasingly being diagnosed with specific allergies."

According to some experts, 4% of adults and up to 8% of children have true food allergies, which can have life-threatening consequences. A food intolerance is more about a body's ability to metabo-

lize a substance. It's important for retailers to understand that although the medical profession considers allergies and intolerances to be distinct from each other, most consumers do not. Perhaps that is why 13% of adults and 12% of children say that they currently suffer from a type of food allergy.

Molyneaux's research shows Generation X, whose members' ages are from 28 to 42, is one of the largest groups who have food allergies. Top allergies reported by adult respondents include dairy/milk, seafood, peanuts, tree nuts, sulfites, wheat/gluten, eggs and soy. She says that kids' main allergies seem to be eggs, dairy/milk, peanuts and tree nuts. "Of those surveyed, 21% say they believe the use of pesticides and preservatives has caused an increasing number of food allergies. This belief, in part, is driving interest in organic products," she says.

## GLUTEN-FREE EXPANSION

Molyneaux says that gluten- and dairy-free foods are among the most well-developed allergen-free categories and that the number of new gluten-free product introductions has doubled during the past five years. She points out that in 2005 there were 240 food and beverage introductions with a gluten-free claim.

"The number of people with celiac disease and gluten intolerance is skyrocketing," says Dominick Cingari, COO of New York-based Fresh Harvest Products, maker of the Wings of Nature brand. "The symptoms these people experience are not trivial and in some cases can be a life-threatening issue. It never fails to amaze me the number of people who tell me that either they or someone they know has an issue with gluten and the struggle they've had finding products to eat."

When people who have food allergies or intolerances look for products to fit their overall health needs, Cingari says, they apply many criteria, including whether the product is free of preservatives and additives, certified organic, vegan or kosher, among others. "One of the reasons we chose to create a line of healthy snack bars was to come up with products that would appeal to, and be able to be eaten by, many types of consumers, not just those with food issues," he says.

To help consumers easily identify product attributes, Wings of Nature includes both organic and kosher symbols on its line of health and coffee bars and plans to add a gluten-free symbol as well. Cingari says the bars sell well when placed near the checkout to capture impulse and incite trial among both adults and kids.

"Women seem to love our organic cranberry crunch bar, while kids go straight for the organic apple cinnamon bar," he says. "The key is our natural sweeteners. We use organic agave syrup, which is from a cactus, and organic brown rice syrup, both of which taste great and are absorbed slowly by the body, which means that they do not spike blood sugar levels like other sweeteners, making them ideal for diabetics and people watching their carb count." While sales of single bars are strong, Cingari says the company recently launched a value-based six-pack.

"The number of people reporting having food allergies and intolerances is truly amazing," says Scott Mandell, president and COO of Enjoy Life Foods, based in Schiller Park, Ill. "The gluten-free market in the U.S. in 2001 was \$200 million. In 2006 it was almost \$700 million and is projected to be \$1.7 billion by 2010." He cautions retailers



not to make the mistake of confusing this interest with a fad. "This is a medically driven situation in which people are proactively looking to food to feel better and help them live a normal, healthy life," says Mandell.

He adds that retailers like Kroger are among those recognizing the opportunity and bringing a significant number of allergen-free items into all of their banners. "Not long ago, products like these were only available in the natural food channel," he says. "But increasingly, conventional retailers are recognizing the need and bringing in more allergy-free products."

What Mandell and others are finding is that many people are allergic to more than one food substance. "This is one of the primary reasons we created a line of products free of the top common allergens and produce those items in allergen-free plants," he says. "We also make it easy for someone picking up our package to quickly tell the product's allergen-free status by featuring a green emblem on the front of our product packaging, as well as noting the information in several places on the back panel."

But he acknowledges that all the packaging in the world would not help stimulate repeat purchases if the taste profile weren't there. "We do a lot of sampling and couponing through outreach support groups and through nutritionists and dieticians. By the time the target consumer walks into the store, many are already familiar with and have tasted our products," he says.

Clair Sidman, associate director of marketing at Lawrence, Mass.-based Ian's Natural Foods, says her company has also found that people with a food intolerance or allergy tend to suffer from more than one. Three years ago Ian's developed a line of products that are free of seven of the eight top food allergens. The company's wheat-free, gluten-free line, for example, is also free of milk, casein, eggs, nuts and soy.

## TARGETING KIDS

Given that approximately one-third of food allergy and intolerance sufferers are kids, Sidman says her company targets many of its products to the younger set. Newest in the line are fresh toast sticks, chicken patties and lightly battered fish.

"These consumers do not shop on price. In terms of priorities, parents want to know the product is safe for their allergic child to eat and that the product tastes good. Oftentimes in the past, product selection has been so limited parents of allergic kids were forced to make their own food at home," says Sidman. "Kids don't want to feel like they are differ-

