



For many people in today's fast paced world, social and even work lives are centered on eating out with partners, friends, colleagues and business contacts. Are food allergies an impenetrable barrier cutting off from this primary source of social interaction? Do you have to stay home and miss out on this huge slice of life to stay safe? This is what Kim Koeller and Robert La France wondered. We have their answer in their *Let's Eat Out!* book series, which takes you through all the steps needed to eat out successfully and safely. They tell *Allergy Today* why they gave up lucrative corporate careers to do what they do.



When Life Gives You Lemons...**Make Lemonade!**

Living an active life while managing food allergies can be challenging, particularly when those allergies affect your career and your family. The everyday difficulties experienced both at home and in the outside world may seem overwhelming, particularly when allergies are first diagnosed. Although you have a fair amount of control over what you want at home, it's another story once you venture outside your front door. When Kim Koeller was diagnosed with food-related allergies as well as coeliac disease (an autoimmune disorder reflected in a life-long intolerance to gluten, the protein found in wheat, rye and barley), she thought at first that eating away from home was no longer an option.

At the time, Kim was an international business consultant (with a Masters in International Management from Thunderbird) and a partner with Accenture, the world's leading consultancy. She had already flown over a million miles worldwide, eating 80 percent of her meals away from home in over 25 countries spread across four continents. She was not willing to give up the travel and career she loved because of her diagnosis. So she needed to figure out how to safely eat gluten and allergy-free foods anywhere in the world, regardless of her location or destination.

To accomplish her goal, she conducted extensive research, scouring hundreds of websites, subscribing to all the allergy-related publications she could find and joining over 20 international allergy and coeliac associations. She also read numerous books and publications and hundreds of articles on allergies, auto-immune diseases and coeliac disease. However, she found that the focus of this literature was either on gluten and allergy-free cooking at home or providing background information about coping with allergies. Only a very small percentage of the available material discussed eating in restaurants or traveling with gluten and other food allergies.

"I was very surprised to realize that books devoted to these topics had not been written. There was a significant void in the global market for products aimed at educating the 300-plus million individuals managing food allergies, coeliac disease and special diets on how to eat safely when away from home and while traveling!" So Kim established two companies, AllergyFree Passport® and GlutenFree Passport®, to help shorten the learning curve associated with managing food allergies and coeliac disease for the millions of people affected by special diets; and to empower them to travel and explore the world.



As you can imagine, this was no small task. Since Kim had limited experience with culinary and restaurant operations, she needed help. Her good friend Robert La France, a restaurant industry veteran, turned out to have the ideal background to make her vision a reality. During his 12 years in the restaurant industry, Robert had worked extensively with Asian, European and North American cuisines.

The spectrum of his professional experience ranged from small single restaurant operations to large publicly traded companies with 100-plus locations. His experience across all aspects of restaurant operations had given him extensive insight into guest requirements, including the need for people with food allergies to be confident that their concerns about cross-contamination and hidden allergies in meals would be listened to and understood.

He had also devoted his spare time to his passion for the culinary arts. Independent study and many informal cooking sessions with professional chefs had given him a breadth and depth of understanding, as well as a practical working knowledge of most international cuisines. And Robert also had a personal understanding of the impact of living with food allergies. Not only as a restaurant professional had he witnessed the struggles and anxieties associated with dining out for people with food allergies, but he had also seen his brother struggle with gluten intolerance, and now his close friend Kim with coeliac disease, as well as other food allergies. So supporting family and friends and having compassion for restaurant clients with food allergies was an important part of his personal and professional life.

"For me, deciding to work with Kim was a 'no-brainer'. Because of my background, I felt that I had a lot to offer. More importantly, I was one of the only people to understand Kim's vision from day one. It really made the perfect atmosphere for collaboration: Kim had the perspective of the individual impacted with food allergies and I had the restaurant perspective of serving guests with special dietary requirements." The result was that Kim and Robert both changed their careers to devote 100 percent of their life energy to achieving their mission. The only question that remained was how!

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LET'S EAT OUT

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

They decided that a book series would be the best way to share the knowledge base they had developed and to gain the interest of the global media, which would in turn broaden people's awareness of food allergies and coeliac disease. Book proposals were sent out to major publishing houses and feedback was extremely positive; however, the publishing industry would take years to produce a finished product and would also allow them only minimal control over the marketing and design.

"The marketing companies we met with wanted to position our concerns into this big cloud of fear and impending doom. That type of fear goes completely against our message of hope and empowerment through knowledge," remarked Robert. "I completely agree," added Kim, "We wanted people to know that they can do it, all it takes is education, communication and preparation. Educate yourself on what you can and cannot eat. Communicate effectively with the restaurant staff so they can work in collaboration with you to manage your diet. Finally, you need to be prepared in the event that something goes wrong. In the case of anaphylaxis, you must always carry your adrenaline auto-injector and know how to use it. Following these key steps will alleviate most of the stress and anxiety associated with living with food allergies."

Getting the book series out quickly and controlling the way in which their message would be presented were the driving forces to start their next company, R & R Publishing®, whose mission is to create pioneering media for people managing special diets. They released the nearly 500-page full color 1st edition book: *Let's Eat Out! Your Passport to Living Gluten and Allergy Free*. This was the world's first book dedicated to eating "around the corner and around the world while managing 10 common food allergies". A month later they released three pocket-sized cuisine passports designed to be carried in a purse or jacket pocket. These included the *American Steak & Seafood and Mexican Cuisine Passport*, the *Chinese, Indian and Thai Cuisine Passport* and the *French and Italian Cuisine Passport*. A month later, the *Let's Eat Out!* series was expanded by the release of the *Multi-Lingual Phrase Passport*, a language guide that provides over 1,200 phrases to help people communicate about their food allergies in French, German, Italian and Spanish.

Initially published in 2005, the book has been recognized by various publishing industry organizations with awards such as Best Health & Diet, Best Health & Wellness, Best Travel, Best First Non-Fiction and Best Classic Reference. In addition, the *Multi-Lingual Phrase Passport* has also received Best Language and Best Travel Guide awards. The *Let's Eat Out!* book series has been featured in hundreds of magazines, newspapers, radio and TV shows as well as endorsed by celiac / coeliac and food allergy associations across the globe.

While presenting at hundreds of conferences worldwide, Kim and Robert received tremendous positive feedback about the book series and its impact on special diet lifestyles. At the same time, individuals and businesses requested even more detailed information specific to cuisines, menu items, eating out and traveling. After years of extensive research and testing, the new enhanced and revised *Let's Eat Out with Celiac /Coeliac & Food Allergies!* now addresses this demand. Additionally, in-depth travel checklists have also been developed based upon thousands of discussions, to further increase the comfort level with airlines, hotels, cruises and foreign travel.

So where do they go from here? "While we've achieved a great deal in a short time, our mission is far from being accomplished," says Koeller. "We're continuing our educational initiatives and consulting services to help the restaurant and hospitality industries worldwide develop a higher standard of service for those with food allergies and special diets. Our ultimate goal is to raise awareness of food allergies around the world to a level where the lifestyle is universally understood and supported by businesses."

Both Kim and Robert agree that living with special dietary requirements take a bit of work but doesn't need you to sacrifice your quality of life. "With my diagnosis, I felt like I was holding a bag of lemons. Now that I've learned how to make lemonade, I look younger, I feel better and the quality of my life has improved dramatically." Kim reflects, "When it comes to our work at AllergyFree Passport® and GlutenFree Passport®, the thoughts of Ralph Waldo Emerson sum it up best: 'If I have helped just one person in exploring a new location, be it in the city or country side, within their own country and/or on foreign lands, I will feel as though I have succeeded.'"

Kim Koeller and Robert La France are international recognized speakers, global consultants and award-winning co-authors of the Let's Eat Out! series.

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