



# Allergic Living Magazine Article

## Spotlight: Kim Koeller - Author



Kim Koeller doesn't do anything half-way. After diagnoses of food allergies (seafood, dairy, pork, assorted food preservatives), chemical and environmental allergies (goose feathers, ammonia, penicillin, cat and dog hair), and then celiac disease, Koeller decided if she couldn't beat her allergies, she had to manage them.

She scoured websites for information, joined 20 international allergy and celiac associations, read books and hundreds of articles. But she found hardly any advice for avid travelers trying to navigate airline meals and restaurants with waiters who speak a different language. Koeller's solution? The seminal 2005 book *Let's Eat Out: Your Passport to Living Gluten and Allergy Free* (R&R Publishing). Co-written with Robert La France, it's dedicated to eating outside the home while managing the 10 most common allergens. From the road, Koeller spoke with Allergic Living.

### **Allergic people are often fearful of travel and foreign cuisine. Were you ever intimidated?**

I was daunted by eating out around the corner, especially after I was diag-

nosed with celiac disease. But I was working as an international management consultant, and by that time, I'd already flown over a million miles, eating 75 percent of my meals away from home in over 20 countries on four continents. I wasn't willing to give up what I loved to do, so I needed to figure out how to eat gluten and allergy-free food anywhere in the world.

### **If you gave only one restaurant travel tip, what would it be?**

Arm yourself with the knowledge needed to safely eat allergen-free in any restaurant. Always double-check ingredients and preparation techniques, even if something might seem safe. For example, wheat flour or bread crumbs may be added to a flourless chocolate torte, or risotto might be made with seafood stock, even if the dish itself doesn't contain seafood. Knowing what questions to ask the staff and what modifications can be made to accommodate your dietary needs will empower you to have a safe and enjoyable dining experience.

### **What's the best allergy-friendly restaurant meal you've ever had?**

That's really difficult. A sampling of the best would include: the In N Out Burger in San Francisco for the first burger I could eat with my hands (it was wrapped in lettuce); Prêt a Manger in London for my first "sandwich without the bread"; Café Marley in Paris for my first entrée served with a superb allergy-free sauce; Churrascaria in Chicago for an amazing Brazilian churrasqueira; Il Forno in Toronto for my first gluten-free pizza, and Bistro 990 in Toronto

for an incredible allergy-free gastro-nomic experience.

### **What's been your worst travel food experience?**

I've gotten sick from dishes with allergens hidden in various ingredients, or because of preparation techniques such as flour being added to omelettes, steaks that were finished in butter. But out of all my experiences, I think the worst one was in Washington, D.C. Some colleagues and I went to a restaurant that refused to serve me anything out of fear of liability. Not only was this shocking and embarrassing – it infuriated me. Instead of leaving in frustration, one of my colleagues politely asked, "Can't you just make her a salad with fresh vegetables?"

### **A lot of parents of allergic kids think foreign travel is too risky. What do you say to them?**

I understand and empathize. That said, I believe it's really important for kids and adults to feel comfortable with traveling. It's all about education, communication and preparation. Having an understanding of food ingredients, how food can be prepared and what techniques require attention is key. Knowing what questions to ask in English before traveling to a foreign country is critical, as is being prepared with medications, such as an EpiPen, in the event that something goes wrong. This approach takes effort and courage, but from my perspective, the end result is definitely worth it.

Interviewed by Laura deCarufel  
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