

Towards further democratization of food consumption: Keeping the consumer informed.

AUTHORS:

Noel Buttigieg¹ & Paulino Schembri²

¹ University of Malta,

²University of Central Lancashire.

Authors' email:

¹ anfora1@hotmail.com

² lino@alfservicesgroup.com

Corresponding author:

Noel Buttigieg

Institute for Tourism, Travel & Culture.

University of Malta.

Msida

MSD 2080

Malta

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the rational driving recent EU legislative developments in providing obligatory food information to the consumer. One dimension of this study tries to understand how this legislation reflects a contemporary awareness of human relations to food. This legislation tries to emphasize the democratization of food socialization, irrespective of dietary requirements or otherwise. This brings us to another dimension of this study, emphasizing the nourishing component of the legislation. This is the result of the complex relationship between food producer and the consumer. The majority of food businesses, being small and medium sized, encounter difficulties in understanding and managing food allergies. In an attempt to avert this multifaceted challenge, the EU promulgated a legislative measure emphasizing a shared responsibility between the consumer and the food business. Amid such proactive position, current evidence indicates how patients suffering from food allergies are constantly met with significant difficulties.

KEY WORDS:

Food allergies, food democracy, legislation, food culture

People by nature require eating several times during the course of the day. Some plan their dietary requirements; others just go along and satisfy their needs at restaurants or eateries. Consumers also resort to street food, which in the last few years has become more popular and somewhat more sophisticated and varied. In all these situations, the consumer expects wholesome food amid the limited information food businesses provide in a menu.

Recent regulatory measures instruct food businesses to provide the consumer with accurate information about the ingredients employed at all stages of production. The physiological and psychological importance of wholesome food motivated official authorities to ensure the safety of food. Considered as a basic moral obligation, governments never relaxed their intention of ensuring sufficient food quantity and quality. Amid such convictions, the whole concept of trust is constantly being challenged as science continues to inform the consumer about possibilities of ingesting harmful foods. The fear of consuming offensive food remains to be a constant hidden concern. This understanding emanates from the growing physical distance between the consumer and the producer. The lack of direct control over the 'production of consumption' triggers a myriad of complex anxieties, including the fear of ingesting life threatening foods.

Put differently, trust marks an important bond between the consumer and the food businesses. Throughout the whole food chain, communication is of vital importance to ensure the safety of food. To generate further ease of mind, food service providers are expected to inform the consumer using accurate and effective means of communication.

Food business operators are legally bound to devise systems to ensure the safety of food. This also means that any allergy related information is accurate and clearly communicated. Effective communication about ingredients and methods of food production between fellow operators and between the business operators and the consumer is now a must. What once seemed to be a gesture of cordiality is today a legal obligation.

The purpose of this study is to explore the rational driving recent EU legislative developments in providing obligatory food information to the consumer. One dimension of this study tries to understand how this legislation reflects a contemporary awareness of human relations to food. Effective communication and accurate information is seen as another modicum to continue to support individuals and their culture, as well as how these interact with each other and with their environment. Evidence indicates how the consumer continues to grow increasingly wary of trusting the food producer, especially when suffering of any food allergies. If food has a constant tendency to transform itself into situations, then it is also true that particular situations can go unnoticed when the general understanding holds that social cohesion is often created by exclusion rather than inclusion. This legislation tries to emphasize the democratization of food socialization, irrespective of dietary requirements or otherwise. This brings us to another dimension of this study, emphasizing the nourishing component of the legislation. This is the result of the complex relationship between food producer and the consumer. The majority of food businesses, being small and medium sized, encounter difficulties in understanding and managing food allergies. Some claim awareness of such challenges but then exhibit stark ignorance on the matter. Others opt to ignore such requirements, holding the consumer responsible for their decision. In an attempt to avert this multifaceted challenge, the EU promulgated a legislative measure emphasizing a shared responsibility between the consumer and the food business. While the consumer is expected to inform of any allergies, the food service provider is required to present accurate ingredient information. The consumer and the food business are communicating further than just a gesture of cordiality, thus ensuring that both parties are fulfilling their responsibilities.

The Context

Food is more than a body fuel. In the words of Roland Barthes, 'An entire "world" is present in and signified in food...[it] transforms itself into situations and performs a social

function, it's not just physical nourishment' (Counihan & van Esterik, 1997). Food is an important marker of our sense of individual and collective identity. Food is an important channel that permits an attempt at self-understanding; it is a revealing means of understanding our behaviours and our social interactions with other humans. Against this understanding, social scientists are constantly trying to decode the complex human relationship to food. The EU legislative measure, similarly, tries to bring together the two important dimensions of this relationship. The first consideration probes on the connection between physiology and culture, the nutritional function and the symbolic function. The second consideration focuses on the confluence between the individual and the collective, the psychological and the social.

This multi-dimensional character is mainly driven by two basic aspects of human relationship to food: first, humans are omnivores, and in the words of Michael Pollan, the associated implications generated an 'omnivore's dilemma'; secondly, humans constantly seek ways of how to use food as a 'voice', a means of how food relates the self to the collective, a dialogue between the 'outside' and the 'inside' of the human body (Pollan, 2006; Rozin & Fallon, 1981).

The omnivore's experience is primarily driven by the basic understanding that humans are autonomous, free and adaptable. But this sense of liberation generates equally contradictory challenges. The omnivore's dilemma is sandwiched between the human need of a variety of foods to ensure effective sustenance and the sense of conservatism when it comes to internalise 'new' foods as the unknown could present a potential danger. The omnivore's dilemma for Pollan (2006) is represented by the constant tension between the need for change and variety, as well as the fear of the unknown. The latter represents an element of anxiety, caused by the human endeavour of what Brillant Savarin (2009) encapsulated in the famous 'you are what you eat'. This endeavour depends on the human ability to control food as the fuel that conditions the body, the mind and therefore one's

identity. The internalisation of food, to use Mary Douglas' term, entails a series of risk taking decisions as the consumer's life and health are at stake. Today, anxiety is not necessarily generated as a result of the human interested of exploring 'new' foods. Humans are increasingly feeling unsafe even with the food they are familiar with. As the production of consumption becomes more the prerogative of the food business, the consumer is faced by the dilemma of not exerting enough control over food.

There are some 150 million people worldwide (Elucidare, 2011) who suffer from one or more food allergies. An obvious marker of such discomfort originates from tendency to attribute the problem with past consumption experiences. As self-proclaimed doctors, some precipitate in assuming that they could be allergic to a particular food. In several population studies, 20-45% of adults believe they suffer from adverse reactions to food (Teufel et al., 2007). These symptoms vary from true food allergy reactions which is about 2-4% in adult population, food intolerance or irritable bowel syndrome, to somatoform or other mental disorders (Teufel et al., 2007).

The people who have to deal with possible potential life threatening situation might have less confidence than others to consume food prepared by the loose food industry (Coutts & Fielder, 2009). In a study by Pratten and Towers, it is reported that 60% of consumers find restaurants' menus misleading or lacking in information. Although this indicates a serious gap in communication, it is also reported that the consumers fail to ask for further information in fear of appearing 'fussy' (Pratten & Towers, 2003).

At a glance, the person at risk of any food allergy only needs to be protected from the offending food that could cause harm. However, ensuring that the information provided is accurate and communicated effectively to the consumer is far from simple. Recent studies have shown that food allergic individuals are at risk of negative emotional and social outcomes, including anxiety avoidance and risky behaviour (Boye & Godefroy, 2010).

Apart from modern scientific knowledge and the constant questioning of the reliability of qualitative methods of research, there are several advocates to raise awareness about the impact of food allergies. It is safe enough to state that there is a well established collective identity in support of this understanding. In fact, the hallmarks of a social movement in this respect are quite evident. Supermarket shelves are lined with food catering for those consumers with particular dietary requirements, while restaurateurs have marked their marketing strategy, even if totally misinformed about the complexity of food allergens. Amid such developments, several food service providers are still hesitant to align themselves to these respective demands. This is not necessarily the result of ill-will, but rather of the complexity of the situation within which food service providers could exist.

The food service industry employs vast numbers of people, with restaurants being the largest employer in the industry (Pratten & Towers, 2003). This industry requires additional seasonal workers, it is therefore understood that due to globalization and somewhat free mobility of people (Koikkalainen, 2011), language (Nerb et al., 2011) and different cultural backgrounds could present complex challenges to ensure food safety (FAO/WHO, 2006) and compliance to a set standard or regulations within a food production unit. These complex situations bring into the discussion the competences of the people employed or otherwise, who prepare food for the consumer who opt to resort to these eateries to satisfy their nutritional requirement. The majority of food businesses being small and medium size employ about 70.9% of the workforce (EU NACE Rev1.1). The same statistics indicate that within this specific industry the workforce tends to be younger than other activities with no less than 35% having an age of 15-29 years, a clear characteristic linked to the relatively low skill and low paid nature of many of the jobs within the industry (EU NACE Rev1.1). This situation is further compounded by the low retention rate in employment which might also discourage the employer to invest in training the staff which will affect the food safety. As much as the food industry is aware of these challenges, the food allergy patient fears these shortcomings. The rising phenomenon among those

consumers interested in the services of restaurateurs propelled other awareness campaigns emphasizing the concepts of fair, equal and good.

The anxiety generated by the collective obsession of contaminated food among western consumers in recent decades gave rise to numerous pressure groups suggesting alternative food policies to policymakers and public health officials. This movement shifted to the 'front burner' the concept of food democracy. Food democracy was discussed by Via Campesina, an international peasants' organisation, during the 1996 World Food Summit. Thereafter, the term took different shapes and meanings as the concept is far-ranging and tackles various aspects of the food system. One recent development focuses on the right of information and effective means of communication necessary to facilitate adequate food choices for consumers interested in the qualities of their consumption particularly those suffering from food-related allergies.

As a process, the European Union (EU) had embarked on a project intended to promulgate legislative measures to ensure food information as part of a process to alleviate unnecessary anxieties and fears experienced by patients when seeking the services of the food business industry. Since then, sustained research continued to inform governments, as well as legislators, who identified more measures to continue to improve the quality of life of the consumer. This conviction has recently been encapsulated in another legislative measure that specifically earmarks the importance of food democratisation towards making the right food choices. Therefore, in what ways has increased knowledge about food allergies shaped individual coping strategies, if at all? What is the relationship between food, the body and sociality for people with food allergies?

Food Control

The twentieth century could be marked as a revolutionary period towards the democratisation of food. Especially in the developed world, fear starts to shift from the prospect of having no food, to having too much to choose from. Long-standing markers of social class distinction would gradually experience interesting transformations. As the food industry expanded its horizons, a plethora of exquisite and highly tasty foods turned the exception into the norm. Consumers are gradually becoming increasingly knowledgeable about particular dietary regimes and the effect on the body. Against this background, democratisation became the main proponent in reaction to fear and anxiety. A cursory look at repeated cases immediately communicates the complexity of those situations experienced by consumers suffering from food allergies.

Different risk behaviours taken by food allergy sufferers can be linked to situation, age, knowledge or lack of it, peer pressure, dare and frequency of allergy reaction occurrence by the effected persons. With children (6-15 years) and young adults (13-21 years) the situation is very complex as this group of people believe that dangers and consequences can be controlled, which in turn generates an illusionary perception of control (Madsen et al., 2010). Responsibility of care shifts from parents to children (off springs) as these grow older and with this also anxiety appears particularly strong as the lives of the consumer becomes more peer and less parent based (Madsen et al, 2010). The age of the sufferer influences the management of food safety risks which could be controlled through wider acceptance of the conditions by peers and boarder knowledge by all those who are involved in food production and preparation. Ultimately the consumers have to be in control of what could put their health at risk. For this very reason, some food consumers prefer to enjoy the short lived positive moments of conviviality over the after affects of the food on the body. If some try to ignore dietary instructions, others have overreacted to it. Irrespective of human behaviour, as the modern food life is also

increasingly haunted by perceived and real fear of food as a poison, the food industry is expected to redress this challenge as part of this ongoing revolution towards food democratisation.

The recent EU Regulation (EU) 1169/2011 addresses the provision of food information to the consumer with the scope of providing a basis for the assurance of a high level of protection of the consumer's information needs, including non-pre-packed food also known as loose food. Article 44 of the same regulation states that the provision entrenched in Article 9(1) refers to, *"any ingredient or processing aid listed in Annex II or derived from a substance or product listed in Annex II causing allergies or intolerances used in the manufacture or preparation of a food and still present in the finished product, even if in an altered form;"* needs to be made known to the consumer in order to provide an assurance of a high level of protection in relation to the food information (Regulation (EU) 1169/2011). (Annex II)

Food business operators are legally bound to devise systems to ensure that the food they supply would be safe (Regulation (EC) 178/2002). The same regulation also goes on to state that it aims to protect the interest of the consumer and that it would provide basis for the consumer to make informed choices about the food to be consumed. Article 14(4)c states that food should not be placed for sale if this could be injurious to particular health sensitivities of a specific category of consumers where the food prepared is intended for that category of consumer. This suggests that when food is prepared for allergic or intolerant consumers, it should not in any way put their health in any risk of injury. The information provided should help consumers determine if the consumption of a particular food or a category of foods could have an adverse health effect (Regulation (EC) 178/2002). This clearly puts a moral responsibility on the food producer to offer only food that will not put the health of the consumer, including sensitive individuals, at risk. It is noted however that the front of house staff do not always refer food queries made by the allergic consumer

back to the kitchen and try to be convincingly knowledgeable but wrong as to the status of the meal (Leitch, Walker & Davey, 2005). The same study shows that commercial catering caused 76% of food-related reactions where, neither the serving staff nor the caterers were aware of the presence of the offending ingredients. This worrying situation clearly indicates that there is lack of knowledge of ingredients within food, that most of front of house staff did not check the allergen status of the meals and that there is a need for further training in the subject of food allergen control (Leitch, Walker & Davey, 2005; Bailey et al., 2011) within the food operations. This demonstrates a shortfall in capability to meet the legal requirements stated above. It is precisely these shortcomings that require attention, issues that need to be rectified so as to give back, unconditionally, the joy of eating to the food allergy consumer.

The sense of democratisation, as uniform as it might seem, carries different meanings that could vary with gender, age and social status. The meaning is also influenced by the severity of the food allergies and the level of allergenicity. Studies also indicate how reactions to food allergies occur mainly outside of the home setting. Dining in restaurants, or whilst at school or nursery, work or a friend's house are considered as high risk locations that could trigger food-allergy reactions. This generates psychological distress and impacts the quality of life. In the absence of adequate information and effective communication, customers suffering from food allergies either opt out from participating in such acts of conviviality or else resort only to those restaurants that are usually known to cater for these specific needs. Without any doubt, fear and anxiety remains especially since reactions could simply be the result of cross-contamination or an unexpected substituted ingredient. Against this background, social isolation could be the hardest part of living with a food allergy (Sampson et al., 2006).

What seems to be a rather simple and basic right, led to a myriad of mixed reactions. The lack of understanding by the general public, and the rather stark unwillingness to accommodate such needs impact the quality of life of patients. Evidence also indicates similar reactions from school personnel and extended family. These often fail to understand the high degree of food safety such patients and their family seeks when sharing food with others. This means that patients are constantly on the receiving end. Psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, are caused as soon as food starts to act as an anti-social agent. Not to appear overtly demanding, some might decide to participate in the act of conviviality even when aware that they would eventually suffer physical discomfort due to their food allergy. Others choose to either opt out or else take their own food as part of their diet management programme.

Studies investigating the quality of life in food allergic children and adolescents clearly epitomise the different reactions. Akeson et al. (2007) indicate how parents, and especially the mother of a food allergic child, suffer from anxiety related problems due to their fear of not being able to supervise the food consumption of their children. In fact, Akeson reports that most adolescents imploded their sever reactions to food allergies. Marklund et al. (2004) continues to support such views claiming how Swedish adolescents strive to avoid feeling different from the 'normal' adolescent amid their level of concern. The research of Avery et al. (2003) conducted in England highlights the fear and anxiety experienced by allergic children. This understanding is further corroborated by the investigation of Cummings et al. (2010) which identifies high rates of school absenteeism from the food allergic group studied in the Netherlands. Apart from poorer health outcomes, children are also subjected to one of the worst challenges in the educational experience of a child - bullying. While children may unintentionally consume allergens, exposure could also result from peer pressure (Klennert & Robinson, 2008; Ravid et al., 2012). Lieberman et al. (2010) identifies the children with food allergen challenges with an 'inherent imbalance of power'. The feeling of embarrassment, isolation, belittling and even

depression take over the life of the child who believes that the parents are the only sense of protection. These energies feed on each other as parents become sceptical about the school and the level of protection offered. Apart from the need to avoid problem foods, additional stress and anxiety comes from non-food allergen families, the lack of awareness in school management and the relationship between the students.

The difficulty of not being able to understand the risk had a remarkable effect on members of the family. The study of Bollinger et al. (2006) indicated how daily family life was effected even during situations which exclusively controlled by family members such as meal preparation. The family's social activities are thwarted when such control transfers into the hands of the food producer. The studies of Cummings et al. (2010) and King et al. (2009) have reported that the highest levels of 'living with fear' are associated with children and especially mothers and wives. Counihan (1999) surmises this interesting cultural construct by emphasising its important psychological and emotional influences. There is a cultural universal that recognises the predominant role of women in feeding. Food is an important marker of female identity and a means through which wives and mothers connect and influence any immediate dependants.

Clearly, what we eat not only marks our identity but also exhibits our need to feel control and mastery over what appears to be a chaotic and uncertain world. The study of King et al. (2009) emphasis the higher emotional troubles experienced by mothers in relation to their husbands. The ability to control our food also means establishing order in our lives by avoiding unnecessary anxieties. The new EU legislative measures are meant to reduce such anxieties by bringing a sense of food safety. The persistent fear of cross-contamination, unlabelled products, the nature of ingredients and the difficulty of understanding product labels are considered as among the main challenges towards the democratization of food. In this case, the challenge impacts not only the consumer's body, but also the person's identity. Mothers and wives could experience a better quality of life

when their food-related decisions have a positive impact on family members. More informed choices allows for parents to feel more comfortable involving themselves and their children during social activities. The female connection to and influence over their close of kin continues to support those cultural constructs that define female gender roles in society.

Conclusion

Although great caution and care must always be exercised, living with food allergies does not have to mean a life of constant fear. The EU legislative measure is intended to ameliorate the life of people suffering from food allergies. The ability to establish effective communication helps the patient to deal with those overwhelming emotions as well allows space to embrace the new lifestyle. Accurate labelling and informed food service providers allow individuals not be defined by their food allergy. As soon as consumers start to make the right choices, consumers regain control over their food-related excitement, security, and self-assurance. In order to produce loose food that would be suitable for allergy sufferers, accurate ingredient information, complete knowledge of any previous preparation, knowledge of transportation and storage facilities and the accurate preparation of the recipe according to established standard operational procedures is of utmost importance. All this information need to be available and ready to be communicated to the consumer first and to the enforcer on demand. The new legislation allows the use of new technological means to communicate accurate information at different stages of food production.

Food law including the latest addition reinforces legal obligations for businesses to be compliant with the food tractability requirements by stating that it is mandatory to have information on the identity and composition, properties or other characteristics of food. Whatever the means of communications it is important that the information provided from end-to-end of the supply chain is transferred without errors. The key here is accurate transmission of food information from source to source without transforming a pleasant

dining experience into a clinical environment, yet enabling each consumer to make educated food choices based on solid accurate information.

References

Akeson, Neil, Allison Worth and Aziz Sheikh (2007), "The psychosocial impact of anaphylaxis on young people and their parents," *Clinical & Experimental Allergy*, 37, 1213-20.

Bailey, Samuel, Richard Albardiaz, Anthony J Frew and Helen Smith (2011), "Restaurant staff's knowledge of anaphylaxis and dietary care of people with allergies," *Clinical & Experimental Allergy*, 41,713-717.

Boye, Joyce I. and Samuel B Godefroy (2010), *Allergen Management in the Food Industry*, Canada: Wiley-Blackwell.

Counihan, Caroline M. (1999), *The Anthropology of Food and Body. Gender, Meaning, and Power*, London: Routledge.

Counihan, Caroline M. and Penny van Esterik (1997), *Food and Culture: A reader*. London: Routledge.

Coutts, Jacqueline and Richard Fielder (2009), *Management of Food Allergens*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Cummings, Amanda J., Rebecca C.Knibb and Michel Erlewyn-Lajeunesse (2010), "Management of nut allergy influences quality of life and anxiety in children and their mothers." *Pediatr Allergy Immunol*, 21, 586-94.

EC (2002) European Commission (EC) Regulation No. 178/2002 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 January 2002.<http://eur-lex.europa.eu>

EU (2011) European Commission (EU) Regulation No. 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2011 on the provision of food information to consumers. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/>

Eurostat European Commission (2009), "Hotel, restaurant and catering services statistics - NACE Rev. 1.1," <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/>

Elucidare (2011), "Food Allergies Worldwide. A population review," <http://www.elucidare.co.uk/>

Food & Agriculture Organization/World Health Organization (FAO/WHO)(2006), FAO/WHO "Guidance To Governments On The Application Of HACCP In Small And/Or Less-Developed Food Businesses," http://www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/fs_management/haccp_sldbs/en/index.html

King, Rosemary M., Rebecca C.Knibb and Jonathan O. Hourihane (2009),"Impact of peanut allergy on quality of life, stress and anxiety in the family." *Allergy*. 64, 461-468.

Klennert, Mary D., and Jane L.Robinson (2008), "Addressing the psychological needs of families of food-allergic children." *Curr Allergy Asthma*, 8, 195-200.

Koikkalainen, Saara (2011), "Free Movement in Europe: Past and Present," <http://www.migrationinformation.org/>

Leitch, Ian S., Michael J. Walker and Rachel Davey (2005), "Food allergy: Gambling your life on a take away food." *International Journal of Environmental Health Research*. 15, 78-87.

Lieberman, Jay A., Christopher Weiss and Terence J.Furlong (2010), "Bullying among paediatric patients with food allergy." *Ann Allergy Asthma Immunol*, 105, 282-6.

Madsen, Charlotte B., René Crevel, Chun-Han Chan, Anthony E.J. Dubois, Audrey Dunn Galvin, Bertine M.J. Flokstra-de Blok, Hazel M. Gowland, Sue Hattersley, Jonathan O'B Hourihane, Pia Nørhede, Pfaff, S, Rowe, G, Schnadt, S & Vlieg-Boerstra, BJ (2010), "Food allergy: Stakeholder perspectives on acceptable risk." *Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology*, 57, 256-265.

Marklund, Brigitta, Staffan Ahlstedt and Gun Nordstrom (2004), "Health-related quality of life among adolescents with allergy-like conditions - with emphasis on food hypersensitivity," *Health Quality Life Outcomes*, 2:65-69

Nerb, Gernot, Franz Hitzelsberger, Andreas Woidich, Stefan Pommer, Sebastian Hemmer, and Petr Heczko (2009), "Scientific Report on the Mobility of Cross-Border Workers within the EU-27/EEA/EFTA Countries," <http://ec.europa.eu/>

Pollan, Michael (2006), *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. New York: Penguin.

Pratten, John D. and Neil Towers (2003), "Food allergies: a problem for the catering industry", *British Food Journal*, 105 (4), 279-287.

Ravid, Noga L., Rachel A. Annunziato and Michael A. Ambrose (2012), "Mental health and quality-of-life concerns related to the burden of food allergy," *Immunol Allergy Clin*, 32, 83-95.

Rozin, Paul and April E. Fallon (1981), "The acquisition of likes and dislikes for foods," *What is America Eating?*, 35-48.

Sampson, Margaret A., Anne Muno-Furlong and Scott H Sicherer (2006), "Risk-taking and coping strategies of adolescents and young adults with food allergy," *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, 117, 1440-1445.

Teufel, Martin, Tilo Biedermann , Nora Rapps , Constanze Hausteiner , Peter Henningsen , Paul Enck and Stephan Zipfel (2007), "Psychological burden of food allergy," *World Journal of Gastroenterology*, 13(25), 3456-65.