

Declaration of Freedom

Free-from foods are in demand by people with food allergies and health-minded shoppers alike



June 2014 — That's the seeming mantra of gourmet retailers and manufacturers who are meeting the needs of consumers allergic to specific foods and those hoping to improve wellness by avoiding certain ingredients. Indeed, today's shoppers are searching for the word "free" beyond the traditional connotation with cost: Free-from foods have arguably never been more in demand and available, from natural foods markets to epicurean shops to grocery stores.

A segment of the population has always dealt with food allergies, intolerances and sensitivities. Sugar-free foods for diabetics and lactose-free foods for those with milk or dairy allergies, for example, have been on store shelves for decades.

But today's market for allergen-free foods is broader, driven by often parallel trends and demands. According to database firm Innova Market Insights, beyond a burgeoning market for gluten-free foods over the last few years, the overall free-from category is growing, encompassing products free from the "Big Eight" allergens (see sidebar on page 12) as well as non-GMO foods.

The Big Eight

More than 160 foods can cause allergic reactions in people, but the 2004 Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act (FALCPA) identified eight foods as major allergens.

These foods are often called "The Big 8" or "The Big Eight" because eight types of allergic reactions are attributed to them. Since 2004, the Food and Drug Administration must list these allergens if they are present in a food product.

- Crustacean shellfish (such as crab, lobster, shrimp)
- Fish (such as bass, flounder, cod)
- Tree nuts (such as almonds, walnuts, pecans)
- Eggs
- Peanuts
- Soybeans
- Milk
- Wheat

With more consumers seeking out and consuming allergen-free foods, many have turned to specialty purveyors. "Consumers who need allergen-free products are willing to hunt them out, and there is nothing like a trusted gourmet retailer to them. If a retailer has a reputation for vetting products, it builds consumer trust and adds value," declares Sharon Olson, founding partner of Chicago-based youth marketing research firm Y-Pulse.

Based on the steady shift from niche to category, many manufacturers have delved into allergen-free food products in the past few years, including startup companies and major brands. "It's definitely a very different landscape than it was 10 or 15 years ago," reports Daphne Taylor, owner of Namaste Foods in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. "Peanuts started first, it evolved to gluten, and then soy, dairy, corn and other such allergens."