

Enjoying Food, Travel and Culture with Food Allergies

Loretta Jay, Foods Matter ~ Before food restrictions became part of Loretta Jay's family's life, she researched vacation destinations and planned daytrips. Now much of her pre-travel homework consists of learning the types of food and mode of cooking indigenous to a region. Even though she and her family don't eat in restaurants, she still wants her family to experience the culture of the land they are visiting – including the food. She explains how she does it ...

After several trips, both abroad and domestic, I've found that the trick to successful holidaying on a restricted diet is all in the planning. It does require a little extra work but with foresight and flexibility, food restrictions need not interfere with one's experiences.

In my family of four, three of us have coeliac disease and both kids have extensive food allergies. As a result, we stay at hotels whose rooms have kitchens. For a weekend trip, particularly one that is within driving distance, I have made do with a microwave and our portable fridge. But for longer trips, or those that involve flying, a kitchen becomes essential.

Packing

Before leaving home I ship a box of food ahead to the hotel, for emergencies. We learned this lesson the hard way, when during one trip the only piece of luggage that was lost was the one that held the food! In the box I include a two or three day supply of non-perishable must haves that cannot be made or easily purchased when traveling: brand-specific mayonnaise, several cans of casein and soy-free tuna, plantain chips, pasta, homemade graham crackers and cookies, sunflower seed butter and a corn-free jar of jelly.

Additional tuna, chips, cookies, pancake mix and pasta go into the 'food suitcase', along with some quinoa, trail mix and semi-sweet chocolate chunks. For those with egg allergies, bring ground flaxseed meal or egg replacer from home. A gluten intolerance? Bring your own wheat-free soy sauce. I also pack plastic storage containers and zip-close bags to carry food for picnics.

The last thing I do before leaving the house is fill the suitcase with the perishables. I use a large, insulated bag to contain all the frozen and chilled items: a loaf of bread, bagels, butter substitute and six pounds of tahini-free hummus (a favorite). On one trip I even packed a frozen birthday cake for my son Mickey, who turned five while we were away. A few ice packs help keep the temperature down.

The insulated bag goes into a hard-sided suitcase (extra protection from the inevitable banging around) along with a copy of a letter from our pediatrician explaining the kids' allergies to answer any questions the inspectors may have, if the bag is selected for scrutiny.

Travel

One of the biggest anxiety builders for people with food allergies is air travel. Though my family has had some challenging trips, one particular trip to the Caribbean tested my planning abilities as never before.

We left home at 4.30am to catch a 7.00am flight. With only a one-hour layover before the four-hour connecting flight and we planned to land by 2.00pm. But the plane was delayed by seven hours! Instead of settling into our hotel in time to fit in a swim before dinner, we pulled into the hotel's parking lot at 11.45pm, the kids fast asleep in the rental car.

Fortunately I had packed breakfast, lunch, snacks, drinks – and yes, extra food for dinner. A little non-perishable food for the next day is good to carry as well, in case the flight is rerouted to another city or canceled altogether. Trying to find safe food, while navigating modified travel arrangements, is no fun.

Shopping

Most regions of the world provide some basic foods: potatoes, rice, onions, legumes, salt, olive oil, eggs. Roadside vendors and local markets are wonderful places to find native food, and offer opportunities to meet the people of the land – in a manner that most travelers will not experience.

Strike up a conversation and ask about favorite recipes. I learned about tostados (smashed and fried green plantains) from a woman while selecting baby bananas in a Puerto Rican market. Spanish saffron, locally grown, to make authentic paella is a must when travelling in this region. (If rice is an allergen, try substituting quinoa.) A fishmonger in Greece would love to share his favorite recipe for kalamaraka yemista (baked stuffed squid). When I travelled to Paris I befriended a local wine seller: each evening a different and well-recommended bottle of local wine accompanied our

homemade fare.

If a particular food is forgotten, with some searching one can find processed products to satisfy most restricted diets in many regions of the world. Europe is eons ahead when it comes to gluten and allergen free products. Food is well marked and usually readily available. Most cities and larger towns in the US will also have markets with foods for special diets. A supermarket in the Bahamas had gluten-free cereals and soy milk, but the only special foods I found in Puerto Rico were sugar-free products for diabetic or yeast-free diets. I'd rather spend vacation time exploring posadas in Spain or relaxing on a beach instead of looking for allergen-free pasta – but it is good to know that when travelling around the globe some items are there in a pinch.

Meals

Travelers typically want to embrace the culture of the lands they visit. For those of us with food restrictions, enjoying the food of a culture may seem unattainable. Not so. Before leaving home, research recipes indigenous to the region, either on line or in a local library. If travelling to France, make and freeze some crepes at home. By the time you unpack your suitcase they will still be cold and can remain fresh in the refrigerator. Voil! An instant Parisian breakfast or base for a dessert.

Pancakes are my family's favorite breakfast when travelling. If tree nuts are not an allergen, one can use coconut milk for the liquid and this gives them a little Caribbean twist. I once fried some very ripe (black) plantains and served these as an accompaniment and it seemed like we were dining at an ethnic caf.

Lunches are designed for convenience, and resemble meals that the kids take to school in their lunchboxes: hummus or tuna with chips, cookies and juice or water. The soft-sided cooler bag that carries our air travel food doubles as a picnic basket, and the ice elements keep lunch fresh. What we pack depends on where we are. If traveling in Spain, bring along your own tapas, and order a drink while sitting in a caf on the Zocolo.

Dinners offer the greatest opportunity to experience the cuisine: Caribbean Codfish (see Loretta's Caribbean codfish recipe below) or beef and papaya stew, a Spanish tortilla, Mediterranean red snapper.

In order to limit time in the kitchen, create simple side dishes to supplement the meals: rice and peas or native vegetables. Desserts can also be simple, and still satisfying. We melted the chocolate brought from home and dipped native fruit into it for a fondue-like dessert. Yum!

The most important thing to remember is that food allergies are not who we are, just something that we have. Finding ways to manage our diets while we enjoy and embrace other cultures lets us experience all the world has to offer.

Airport security is of course stringent, but accommodations are available for those with disabilities – and food allergies are considered a hidden disability.

Seventy nations comply with the current international rules for air travel with liquids: each passenger may carry liquid in 100ml containers, enclosed in a one-liter zip-close bag. The same rule applies for liquid foods: peanut butter, applesauce, and yogurt. Exceptions to this rule will be made for those with dietary restrictions if the items are declared to security.

Liquids such as milk substitutes, juices or elemental formula will be allowed in 'reasonable' amounts. Travelers with restricted diets are asked to limit quantities to the amount needed to complete their travel. If more than 100ml is needed, then multiple containers of 100ml each may be packed. The containers should be put into the litre-size zipclose bag.

Those with food restrictions will be permitted to have more than one zip-close bag each – as long as the restricted items are declared to the security personnel. Non-liquid food items are permitted through security, but pack them in plastic wrap or plastic bags. Avoid aluminum foil.

If there is a problem at security, there are always supervisors on site, usually behind a desk area. A customer service manager is also available, but not always on location.

International customs is another challenge for those with food restrictions. Each country has their own customs and border protection department that enforces the laws prohibiting food items, which may 'injure community health, children or plant and animal life.' Agents are concerned with diseases that may infect crop or livestock; food allergies are not their thing. Know the restrictions before getting to your destination. The list of forbidden foods may seem harmless, but there are reasons for the restrictions, and, if the rules are enforced you may be asked to consume the product or throw it away.

Loretta Jay, M.A., is a community planner and the President of Parasol, a consulting organization that specializes in the management of food allergies and celiac disease. Visit www.parasolservices.com for more information.

LORETTA'S CARIBBEAN CODFISH

Wheat, gluten, corn, soya, dairy, egg & nut free

Whether you are travelling in the Caribbean or not, if you can get some saltfish this will certainly make for a great West Indian dinner. Salt cod is a dehydrated fish, which is common in the Caribbean, and is preserved with salt so easily stored without refrigeration. However, salt cod is also quite widely eaten in northern Europe, Spain and Portugal so, if you do not have a Caribbean store locally, it should not be too difficult to find.

Ingredients:

1 1/4 lb salt cod or saltfish
3 tbsp olive oil
3 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
1 onion, peeled and chopped
2 tomatoes, chopped
1 1/4 lb rice or quinoa
1 tsp dried or 1 tbsp fresh coriander
approx 4 cups water

Directions:

Soak the fish in enough water to cover for at least three hours. Pour out water and rinse the fish one additional time.

In large sauté pan or saucepan, sauté onions, tomatoes and garlic in oil until onions are soft – this should take about five minutes.

Add the fish, cut up into 2.5cm pieces and cook for 5 minutes more.

Add rice or quinoa, dried coriander and water. Stir gently so that the contents are evenly distributed.

Reduce heat to low and cover the pan.

Cook for about 20 minutes or until liquid is absorbed – add extra if you need to.

Adjust the seasoning to taste and, if you are using fresh coriander, chop it and stir it in before serving.

SERVES 6 – PER PORTION

484cals – 35g protein

7g total fat – 0.8g sat / 4g mono / 0.5g poly

69g carbohydrate of which 2g sugar

0.6g fibre – 786mg sodium / 2g salt

139mg calcium

GOOD SOURCE OF: Vitamin B12