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## A Guide to Gluten-Free Eating

By GRACE MAALOUF



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A customer orders at Tu-Lu's Gluten-Free Bakery, which is dedicated specifically to providing treats without the protein found in wheat, oats and barley that causes illness for those sensitive to it.

In the sprawling East Village dining scene, there's no shortage of choices: cheap or exorbitant, healthy or indulgent, quick or leisurely, deciding on a meal is a culinary choose-your-own-adventure. There are plenty of options for meat-eaters, for vegetarians, even for vegans. But for the rising number of people intolerant to gluten, a protein found in wheat, oats and barley, what's the best way to navigate the pizza- and dessert-lined streets of the neighborhood?

Enter the spate of restaurants ready to guarantee every last corner of the masses has access to a few of their favorite things. More and more are adding special gluten-free menus or dishes, and others are altering their entire line of offerings to make them friendly to those who can get sick from certain grains and flours.

At East Village comfort-food headquarters S'MAC, for example, the entire mac-and-cheese menu is available in gluten-free varieties. So whether diners want the gruyere-bacon "Alpine" dish or the manchego-fennel-onion "La Mancha," all the pastas can be ordered sans gluten.

When Sarita Ekya and her husband, Cesar Ekya, opened their restaurant in 2006, they knew they wanted it to be "as inclusive as possible," Ms. Ekya said.

"We didn't ever want someone to say that they can't eat at the restaurant because of some dietary restriction," she said.

Ms. Ekya was soon flooded with email and other requests for tailor-made pasta, and she began to research the possibility. She realized that for those with extreme gluten intolerance, or Celiac disease, even cross-contamination would cause illness. Because the restaurant space is small, cross-contamination would always be a concern, she said. So she worked to eliminate all-purpose flour from all S'MAC's recipes, taking a good eight to nine months to test out the new bechamel sauce that forms the base for several of the mac and cheese iterations.

And as Ms. Ekya, 36, went through the process of altering the recipe, she herself actually became "highly gluten-intolerant," which she credited to working "crazy hours" and eating lots of pasta.

"Basically my body just shut down," she said. Faced with the prospect of illness after ingesting even "a speck of flour," Ms. Ekya started to understand what her clientele was going through.

"It was interesting because that kind of kicked it up a notch," she said.

Ms. Ekya estimates that 5 to 10 percent of the restaurant's customers order the gluten-free pasta, and she said they have been "so wonderfully grateful" for the alternative offering.

But getting that alternative up to the restaurant's standards wasn't easy. Besides considerations of taste, the altered recipe also had to hold up against the store's take-and-bake option. Whatever flour mix was substituted would need to survive four to five days of refrigeration, plus baking and reheating. So Ms. Ekya had to test for proper binding and no breaking down, "covering all those bases."

The final replacement, a mix of potato and rice flours, is used in all the dishes. S'MAC, located at 345 East 12th Street, offers delivery and take-and-bake.

While S'MAC is up-front for gluten-free feasts, not all places provide those possibilities. Popular writer and blogger Carol Kicinski, of [Simply Gluten Free](#), said education and communication are two of the most important ways for allergic diners to keep themselves healthy while still enjoying restaurants.

"You want to be aware of buzzwords," Ms. Kicinski said, mentioning that items labeled "crispy," "crunchy" or "crusted" can often contain flour. French fries are often coated in flour, too, and artificial bacon bits can be a problem. Its best to ask if sauces are made from scratch or canned. And at diners that fry most dishes on a griddle, for instance, cross-contamination concerns can be avoided by requesting things be fried in a separate pan.

Ms. Kicinski said it's always possible to call a restaurant ahead of time to discuss dishes and ingredients, and of course there is no shortage of online resources. But another important step she takes is to ask for a gluten-free menu at every restaurant she visits, even if she has "eaten there a hundred times before and the answer has always been no."

"If they don't, and people keep asking for one, eventually they're going to get one," she said.

Ms. Kicinski, who was diagnosed as gluten-intolerant 18 years ago, said awareness about Celiac disease and intolerance has increased, and "choose are a lot broader."

"Eighteen years ago there was no such thing as a gluten-free menu," she said.

And "back in the day," she avoided eating most gluten-free substitutes, which "tasted like cardboard." But companies now have brought those products into the mainstream and improved upon them, and many grocery stores offer whole sections of gluten-free products.

"One of the things that I think that companies are finding out is that the gluten-intolerant tend to be a very loyal consumer," Ms. Kicinski said. "It's not like we have a choice."

Tully Lewis, 29, owner of **Tu-Lu's Gluten-free Bakery**, told The Local that in starting her bakery about a year ago, she wanted to "break down the barriers" of thinking that gluten-free eating is only for people who have to.

"We have customers who aren't gluten-free, they just like the products," she said. Tu-Lu's, at 338 East 11th Street, sells cupcakes, breads, sandwiches and cakes. Ms. Lewis said the most popular item in the glass case is usually the red velvet cupcakes.

Of course, avoiding gluten doesn't necessarily mean sticking to restaurants whose kitchens have completely banished it. For some with less severe concerns about cross-contamination, places with corn-based cuisines can be a good choice. Ms. Lewis says Mexican food is often a good choice, and one of her favorite places to eat in the East Village is **Caracas Arepas Bar**, a Venezuelan restaurant on First Avenue and Seventh Street. Though it isn't specifically a gluten-free eatery, its specialty corn-cake arepas contain none of the offending flours, and come stuffed with a variety of meats, cheeses and vegetables.



Grace Maalouf  
Caracas Arepas Bar.

Ms. Kicinski also suggested Mexican food. Some Thai food can be good since noodles in many dishes are rice-based, but soy sauce contains gluten. The solution? Ms. Kicinski often brings her own.

Ms. Lewis and Ms. Ekya both touted the pizza of **Pala** on Allen Street, where gluten-free options are baked in a special oven, and the menu comes with a detailed list of what can and can't be requested special.

### Cafe Viva Natural Pizza

At the laid-back **Cafe Viva Natural Pizza** on Second Avenue, the pizza slices are piled high with veggies like eggplant, spinach and artichokes on crusts that run the gamut of all dietary specifications. Besides regular white-flour crusts, the spot offers pizza foundations made from spelt and cornmeal, many vegan and topped with soy cheese.



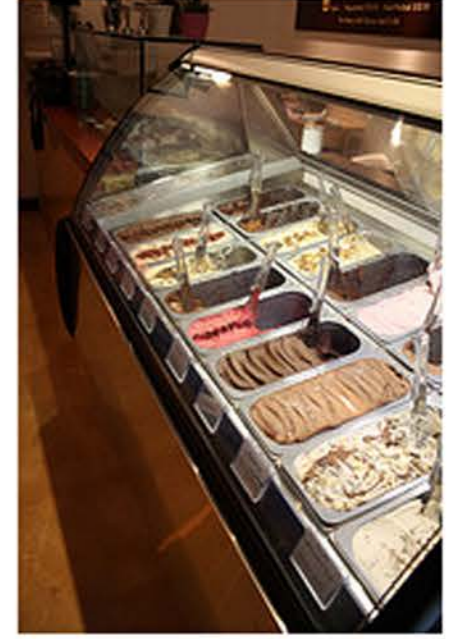
Grace Maalouf  
Cafe Viva Natural Pizza.

Alyssa Rinaldi, 19, avoids several allergens that don't include gluten, but she recently tried Cafe Viva's gluten-free pizza because ingredient-conscious restaurants generally keep other problematic foods out of their dishes.

"Places like this are good for an allergic person," Ms. Rinaldi said. "For an outcast like me."

### Stogo's

Over on Second Avenue between Second and Third Streets, the all-purpose allergy-avoiding **Stogo's** offers a wide array of ice creams that are organic, dairy-free, kosher — and also happen to be gluten-free. They stock cupcakes from popular gluten-free bakery Babycakes, and their menu also includes chocolate truffles and a selection of tea and coffee. Their ice cream is made in-house several times a week, with flavors like salted caramel pecan, toasted almond joy and oatmeal raisin cookie.



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Stogo's.

### Lula's Sweet Apothecary

At 526 East Sixth Street, **Lula's Sweet Apothecary** serves up ice cream in vegan and organic options, and has gluten-free offerings as well. Brooklyn resident John Regular, a Lula's customer of four years, says his favorite flavor is soft-serve cake batter.

On a recent night, Mr. Regular and friend Ita Kolic sat on a bench outside the shop as it closed, and he said he would probably be back the next day after work.

"He's loyal," Ms. Kolic said. Mr. Regular, 23, has been a vegan for the last two and a half years.

"I do it for the street cred," he joked.

### Angelica Kitchen, 300 East 12th Street

At fresh-food haven **Angelica Kitchen**, where ingredients are organic none come from animals, the daily specials menu always has at least one gluten-free option, and the regular menu points out dishes sans wheat. Next door at John's Pizza, all pasta dishes are also available in gluten-free options.



Grace Maalouf  
On 12th Street, Angelica Kitchen and John's Pizza are two restaurants that offer gluten-free options.



Grace Maalouf  
Diners at S'MAC.



Grace Maalouf  
The kitchen at Tu-Lu's Bakery.