

Using NLP for parties

By Eve Menezes Cunningham

With my pepper allergy, general avoidance of meat and not drinking alcohol, my dietary requirements mean it's a wonder I'm invited anywhere. Recently, I wondered why, when preparing for events or dinner parties or even lunch with friends, we don't use more of our NLP.

Imagine framing questions more positively, asking, 'What are your favourite foods?' rather than 'any allergies?' Anyone with allergies or intolerance will, of course, make these known but the emphasis on good, fun, enjoyable food can shift the energy of the whole endeavour.

'There are caterers who do allergy-friendly catering, but if you're catering yourself, you need to do quite a bit of background work,' says Alex Gazzola, author of *Living with Food Intolerance* and several other books on coeliac disease, intolerances and allergies (www.alexgazzola.co.uk).

'Speak with guests with specific food requirements beforehand, making it clear you're prepared to cater for them and making sure you understand their requirements,' says Alex. 'If you're uncertain, and some offer to help in the kitchen with preparation, accept! You will learn a lot – and learning to cater for those with sensitivities is something which we all have to get used to, with increasing rates of allergy/coeliac/intolerance – and other dietary requirements too.'

'If you're dealing with a guest with a life-threatening allergy, you may want to consider a total ban on the ingredient (usually nut – which isn't especially difficult to exclude per se, although you do have to be careful with "may contain traces" products). Even for those with a non-life-threatening allergy/intolerance – like coeliacs – eating gluten may mean days or even weeks of ill health. Although there is more awareness of coeliac disease these days, this comes at a price, and that is that many dieters or "lifestyle" experimenters use the GF (gluten free) diet as a weight loss plan (for which there is no real science to support it) or to just see how they feel. If you do have a coeliac guest, you can do a lot to reassure them by treating their condition with the utmost seriousness it deserves – and not like a "fad dieter".

'Not everyone does, so it'll be appreciated. Again, you have to be so careful as gluten can be found in stock cubes, soy sauce, processed cheese, all sorts of ready-made products etc. People trip up on all sorts of things – they think spelt is gluten free for instance (it's not; it's a type of wheat). There's a lot to learn, so

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it's not something you can really do last minute: it will take preparation and research and thought. You need a scrupulously clean kitchen – gluten can lurk in toasters, and any other crumbs or splashes can get into food as it is being prepared. Take care. There are so many GF (and dairy free) products these days though that you can get basic snacks and bites in most supermarkets to make life easier.

'Do not be offended if people either offer to help in the kitchen, or bring their own food, or decline to eat something you've reassured them is ok, or even if they ask to see a label of a food you're serving (make sure you keep any labels of foods you serve) or ask how something was prepared in great detail. Getting something wrong could have serious consequences for them, and this is how some people "manage" their conditions, especially those newly diagnosed. Do respect their choices and questions and don't make an issue of it.

'If you're catering for a large group of people with mixed requirements, and you're a bold, experimental cook, I would say bite the bullet and do a gluten and nut-free vegan feast, which will tick most of the boxes as far as allergies and intolerances are concerned – and will also cater for most religious or ethical sensibilities too. This in itself could be a terrific



talking point and bring “fun” to the party with ease as it will be so “different”. Use vibrant naturally gluten-free grains – rice and quinoa come in an array of colours – and lots of bright vegetables to make colourful salads and crudités. Get experimental with herbs and spices. Get to love tofu. You can get GF crackers, breads and pittas too now. You can produce a remarkable array of allergy-friendly food which guests will marvel over and will bring a huge sense of fun to any gathering!

‘Don’t forget drinks – gluten-free beers are available, and ciders are gluten-free, but most ales, beers and lagers have gluten, and many wines are fined with dairy or fish, so may not be vegan friendly and pose a small risk to those with allergies. In general, spirits are a good option. A punch bowl is probably not very allergy friendly, simply because it’s not easy to identify what has gone into it.’

‘I’ve had vegetarian friends for as long as I can remember and always love the challenge of cooking for them even though I’m very much a carnivore,’ says food blogger Laura Marcus (www.lauramarcus.com/category/paleo). ‘Also, my dad and gran were diabetic so I always had an interest in different kinds of diets. My gran, cousin, sister and aunt were caterers so it’s kind of in the family.’

Whether you’re hosting or attending, Laura recommends relaxing. ‘People aren’t just going to parties for the food. Avoid over catering and make sure there’s plenty of booze. When I was young, if you provided anything beyond French sticks and cheese,

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you were really being posh! People will always love being fed and appreciate an effort. See it as part of the fun to cater for various diets.’

‘My son and I have coeliac disease and my biggest tip is to really research well ahead of time,’ says Sarah Ockwell (www.babycalm.co.uk). ‘As the parent of a child with a food issue I always contact the party host and ask them if they are aware of my son’s condition and ask what they are planning to serve. If it isn’t appropriate, usually I will offer to send some food I have made for him myself, mostly because of the issue of cross contamination in a non-gluten free home and also because I have lots of experience of making nice gluten-free food and those who haven’t tend to just buy the dry, unappealing products in the shops. So I usually send him with food I’ve prepared.’

‘If I’m hosting a party, I’ll find out in advance if any of the children have food issues and usually will suggest the parents bring any basics that the children like and try to make a few appropriate things myself. As a parent of a child with food issues I would far rather somebody asked me to bring food from home than try to make something and potentially make my child ill!’ ■



Have more fun at your parties

- Don't take things personally. If you tell yourself so and so is clearly trying to kill you when they've simply not got your level of vigilance, you're less likely to want to have fun and party with them.
- See it as an opportunity to expand your repertoire – as everyone says, people will appreciate your efforts to include them AND to keep them safe.
- Be extra kind to yourself. Food and parties can trigger deeper issues. If you're not used to having your needs met, you may assume that your dietary requirements will make you unwelcome.
- Think about the parties you've had the most fun at. How big a part of them was food related? Be safe and relax.