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By Jennifer Iscol Last fall, the Cheesecake Factory hit the pause button on a full national rollout of its gluten-free menu to reflect the impact of the FDA's new gluten-free labeling rule. The company has kept a low profile on its gluten-free business for the past year, but has continued to work on it. The gluten-free menu became available at all cheesecake factory restaurants as of September 5, 2014, according to Alethea Rowe, Senior Director of Public Relations and Brand Management. Menus Subject to The Gluten Labeling Rule The FDA's gluten-free labelling regulations primarily target packaged foods, but in the guidelines published in the Federal Register on August 5, 2013, the agency unexpectedly suggested that restaurants and food services comply with the federal definition of gluten-free and indicated that they would be subject to enforcement. In the persistent absence of additional guidance from the agency, what this means in practice is still a bit unclear. For now, this seems to give restaurants and food services some latitude in interpreting how to comply with the rule if they choose to label the menu items gluten-free. A chain with global ambitions Sweet Corn Tamale Cakes The Cheesecake Factory opened its first namesake restaurant in 1978 in Beverly Hills and has since grown into a publicly traded company with more than 170 locations and \$1.87 billion in annual sales. In 2011, it expanded to the Middle East, where it faces the challenge of complying with Islamic food laws; opened its first Latin American site in Mexico in July; and intends to enter the Asian market. With a clear commitment to serving gluten-free diners, this popular and ambitious chain seems to have a great chance of success with its gluten-free menu. It also has the advantage of studying the dos and don'ts that one could draw from other large restaurant chains that launch gluten-free menus with varying success over the last half-dozen years. The large menu presents challenges Cheese Factory seems to take seriously the responsibility of serving this population, but its journey has not been easy. The chain's signature eclectic menu includes more than 200 items, more than 70 of which are on the gluten-free menu, creating a challenging level of complexity for sourcing, storing and handling gluten-free ingredients and preventing cross-contamination. The fine tuning procedures, as well as the training of management and staff, could not have been a cake trick. A strong effort with Somewhat uneven results With little substantive communication from the company until recently, I collected information by randomly choosing eight cheesecake factory locations in different states to call as a potential dinner and ask a few questions. The answers were generally fairly well informed and consistent, with some curved curved balls in. Evelyn's Favorite Pasta The eight locations have confirmed that they offer a gluten-free menu and that procedures are in place to prevent cross-contact; for example, use dedicated gluten-free fryers and separate water and equipment for pasta. However, one said they don't recommend items made in the gluten-free fryer for people with celiac disease because it is right next to a tray of flour, and another said that deep fryers are right next to each other and an item containing gluten could easily fall in. It's ok if there's some contact, he added, It's not the same as a nut allergy. Revised Warning I also solicited feedback from gluten-free diners by issuing a request to celiac Listserv members about their experiences in cheesecake factories across the country. Just over half of the responses were positive, with praise for the extensive gluten-free menu, good food, and attentive and knowledgeable staff, while others reported negative experiences with uninformed staff or a stray wheat crouton or noodles in their meals. Christopher Gulli, of Oakland, California, had a generally positive experience, but expressed his perplexity about this menu disclaimer: As prepared, all items contain less than 20 parts per million gluten (or no gluten) and some items can be made with gluten-containing ingredients. As Christopher pointed out, It makes almost no sense. Our foods do not contain gluten, but we use ingredients containing gluten? In response to an investigation into what the confusing disclaimer might mean, the Cheese Department provided an updated disclaimer: The GF on Demand symbol indicates that the menu item can be prepared for gluten-sensitive customers, upon request. Please note that the Cheesecake Factory is not a gluten-free environment. Our menu items are handmade in our kitchens, often using shared equipment (including common fryers) and variations in ingredients provided by the supplier may occur. For these reasons, we cannot assure you that no item on the menu will be entirely gluten-free. The question of the fryer persists Wait a second - have they said common fryers? The revised disclaimer introduces a new source of confusion. A number of cheesecake factory employees had told me that the French fries on the gluten-free menu were made in dedicated gluten-free fryers. In every place I had called confirmed having a separate dedicated deep fryer for gluten-free items. Given this discrepancy, I double-checked with the Cheese Factory to clarify whether fried items on the gluten-free menu can be made in a fried pan shared in some places, and the representative confirmed that this is indeed the case. If this is the case, one might guess that French fries at these places may contain more than 20 ppm of gluten. It is not clear. Clear. they would be allowed on the gluten-free menu. Can we have the cheesecake, please? When I visited the Cheesecake Factory in Corte Madera, California, a year ago, I detailed my experience in an article and noted some problems with how the unique gluten-free cheesecake, Godiva chocolate, is handled. On a recent visit, all the same problems were always present. The Godiva chocolate cheesecake was unprotected and shared a shelf with cheesecakes with wheat crusts. Before ordering the cheesecake from the table, I visited the cheesecake window to see how they handled gluten-free orders. Again, the employee there was puzzled by my question about whether the service utensil is shared with other cheesecakes (yes, it still is). Godiva Chocolate Cheesecake In response to our request for an explanation of how this might be a safe practice, a manager came to our table to offer to personally use a piece of baked paper to pick up a slice and set it aside for us, explaining that this was usually not a problem because most of their gluten-free customers are simply gluten-free and indifferent to cross contact. It is not a viable system. In fact, it is not a system at all. This is the only aspect of the gluten-free effort of the company that seems ill-conceived and without thinking seriously. If they label gluten-free cheesecake, there can't be a few sticky wheat crumbs here and there, which would be a recipe for misery in the celiac world. A number of gluten-free observers have also expressed concern that Godiva chocolate is used in gluten-free cheesecake despite the fact that Godiva has this emphatic warning on its website: All our products, including solid chocolate pieces may contain gluten. Anyone allergic to gluten should not consume any of our products. According to Alethea Rowe of the Cheesecake Factory, The chocolate we use in our Godiva chocolate cheesecake is from Godiva and is gluten-free. However, Godiva produces many other products and as a brand does not confirm that all their products are gluten-free. We do not know how they managed to get into such a clumsy chocolate situation, but the explanation is quite satisfactory. Once they have worked on the storage and handling of the Godiva chocolate cheesecake, we will be happy to order it. When will the gluten-free menu be posted online and announced? Goat cheese beets At the time of writing, Gluten-free menu was still not available on the Cheesecake Factory website, although many places have been offering the menu for a year or more. The company has made no apparent effort to commercialize it at this time. If a restaurant does not know how to request the gluten-free menu in the restaurant, its existence could easily be missed. The notable absence of the gluten-free menu in the sends an ambiguous message about its level of engagement. Caution is good, but the total silence of the company is a little unsettling for gluten-free diners, who tend to be insightful observers of a company's commitment because it usually translates into safety. Having safe and delicious gluten-free options in a popular national restaurant chain makes life easier. In fact, it's wonderful. But for this community, communications and public relations are more than subtleties; they are essential elements for a relaxing and enjoyable experience. It should not be the responsibility of the restaurant to guess the meaning of a restaurant's disclaimer or to interpret ambiguous or contradictory communications by staff. Eating out should not require the persistence of a marathon runner, a talent for psychology, expertise in federal regulation and a dose of luck. It should be about good food, good service and good company. Positive Forecasts Hot Asparagus Salad With all the investment the CheeseMaker has put into its gluten-free menu to date, there is a good chance that it will make it, successfully pass on its commitment to the public and publish the menu online. If the company continues to act, we will be pleased to see the first missteps quickly fade in the background. For me, a review of a restaurant's gluten-free efforts always boils down to the person: Will I take our teenage son, who has celiac disease, to eat? There is never a good time to be horribly ill for three days and recover for a week or two. So we are very careful, but let's try to balance that with the desire to socialize, dine and explore the culinary world. With everything I've learned about the Cheesecake Factory's gluten-free business, yes, I'm taking my son there now. However, I would always approach it with caution by calling ahead, asking to speak to a manager on arrival and lowering my list of questions if necessary. And, ironically, we might have to take a pass on the Godiva chocolate cheesecake for now. Ouch. Ouch.

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