

# Off the Beaten Patch: Let's Hear From the Peanut Gallery

*Why my food allergies are making me nuts.*

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You've got to admit, there's a little humor in here somewhere. I live in a place called Walnut Creek — which got its name from all the walnut orchards — and I'm allergic to walnuts. All nuts to be exact.

And I'm not alone.

An estimated 2 million Americans and 1 percent of the world's population suffer from nut allergies but they don't all live in Walnut Creek.

I'm sure there are people in Oyster Bay who are allergic to oysters. No doubt a fair number of people in Wheaton are allergic to wheat. But being allergic to nuts and trying to enjoy a meal in downtown Walnut Creek is making me a bit of a nut case.

I would love to try some of the fabulous Thai and Southeast Asian eateries that have been getting rave reviews, but I can't. The chances are pretty high that they use peanuts or peanut

oils in their cooking and it is wrong of me to think that, like a vegan in a steak house, they should cater to my needs.

Oh sure, I can tell Kung Pao from Kentucky Fried but I'm not talking about the food here, folks. I'm talking about the servers and wait staff. This is where I go completely nuts.

If I'm invited to a large banquet, I very discreetly ask to speak to the head server or the chef to alert them that I am allergic to nuts, review what is going to be served and then show them where I am sitting. If, however, I am having dinner out with friends and family the second after we hear, "Hi my name is \_\_\_\_ and I'll be your server tonight," I pipe in with, "Hi, I'm Donna Lynn and I'm allergic to nuts," so there will be no surprises during the meal.

When they go over the list of specials, which may include Trout Almondine, I ask if that would be almonds as in nuts. The server usually looks at me with a blank look and I say, "I'm allergic to nuts, remember?" He (it's usually a he, sorry, but it's true) smiles and says, "Oh, I forgot."

I order my meal like something out of *When Harry Met Sally* —everything is on the side just in case. I also politely ask the server to note my allergy in the computer so the chef and manager can be aware.

Seems fairly straightforward, but it's not. So let's get down to the nuts and bolts.

I was at a Walnut Creek Chamber function at (where else?) Scott's Seafood. They were passing hors d'oeuvres and the server asked if I would like a brioche with goat cheese and pesto and I said, "Thank you but I'm allergic to nuts and most pesto is made with pine nuts." He said, "It's really good and you should try it." I smiled and said, "Thank you but I'm allergic to nuts and most pesto is made with pine nuts." And as God is my witness, he said, "Close your eyes and eat it – you won't be able to tell."

I wanted to kick him in his nuts.

You can't beat the food and the service at Lark Creek Café. But last month I was there with my family and, after doing the 'I'm allergic to nuts' routine, our server told us about the specials and never blinked an eye when he suggested I might enjoy the lima baby greens with shaved asparagus and toasted almonds or perhaps the Fuji apple salad topped with blue cheese and spicy walnuts. I guess he forgot that I had just told him I was allergic to nuts and didn't remember when he brought each of us one piece of cashew fudge for dessert.

These are just two recent examples; the list goes on. And it's not limited to Walnut Creek – it's everywhere. Maybe people don't think it's a big deal to have a food allergy and think we are all a bunch of yuppie whiners, but it's no fun having an allergic reaction and I wouldn't wish it on anyone.

Often it's the larger chain restaurants like The Cheesecake Factory that do the best job of going over all the different dishes to stay away from and which cheesecakes use nuts in their crusts. I understand that a set menu makes it easier for the servers to know what's what all the time. And the smaller (fresher and better) the restaurant, the more chances the menu changes daily and the chef wants to try new and more interesting dishes. That means that everything from — well, soup to nuts — may contain nuts.

I'm sure those who can't tolerate wheat, eggs, shellfish, soy and dairy have many of the same challenges. But people expect ice cream to contain dairy whereas it's hard to suspect or spot crushed nuts in a pizza crust. I'm not telling you to stop creating these wonderful new dishes — I'm suggesting that you note less obvious ingredients with an asterisk on the menu and in the mind of a conscientious server.

Please take the time to listen to your guests. We want to enjoy the experience as much as you and that's pretty much it.

In a nutshell.