

# Hold the allergens

By JANE DORNBUSCH

**M**ost of us, when we sit down to a meal, are looking for something tasty and satisfying. But at least 11 million Americans are just hoping that what they eat won't kill them. That's the number of people — and some say it's underreported — who suffer from food allergies of one kind or another. Not all those allergies are life-threatening, of course. But according to the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network, it's estimated that 150-200 people die annually from food allergies. Another 2,000 are hospitalized each year. And, says FAAN, the number of allergy sufferers is growing rapidly.

Some might look at this and see a public-health issue. But an increasing number of food manufacturers see an opportunity. "In the next few years, I think that every major company will be creating products

that are allergen-free," said Phil Lempert, editor of Supermarketguru.com and an expert on food marketing. Lempert sees it as an extension of the increasing specialization of foods and segmentation of the marketplace: "Marketers are understanding that they can't just make a product that everybody in America will buy. Now we have different subsets of the population, whether it's about allergies or trans fats or ethnic flavors or dietary needs. You have to have a bunch of different products."

Be that as it may, the major manufacturers haven't yet bit. But small food producers are jumping in, eager to fill what they see as a lucrative and underserved niche.

"There's a need out there and we're ready to fill it," said Jeff Canner, vice president of marketing for Revere-based Ian's Natural Foods. The specific need Ian's saw was that of parents wanting convenient foods for their allergic children. "For a family with children who have allergies to nuts, dairy, eggs and gluten — they're still busy families and they had no place to turn. We thought we could provide these people with some solutions." The solutions are frozen chicken nuggets, fish sticks and alphabet-shaped french fries made without six of the most common allergens.

Response to the recently introduced line, said Canner, has been "excellent. I do get a lot of thank-you e-mails from moms and dads."

Many of the new allergen-free products are aimed at kids, but for Patsy Rosenberg, who runs Cherrybrook Kitchen in Waltham, her own allergic reaction was her inspiration. Four years ago, she went into anaphylactic shock after eating mashed potatoes made with milk; before that, she said, food allergies "weren't on my radar screen."

Now, they're her livelihood. The self-described dessert lover developed a few recipes for baked goods for her own use, then realized that she was on to something marketable. Working in her kitchen, which she described as looking like a "chemistry set," she developed a line of mixes that are kid-friendly and, she said, as tasty as their mainstream counterparts.

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