

Vegan croissants, gluten-free pasta: Europe wakes up to fussy eating

October 22 2014, by Elizaveta Malykhina

Once firmly entrenched in their traditional gastronomy, consumers in gourmet havens like France and Italy are slowly starting to demand gluten-, dairy- and meat-free diets as environmental and health concerns kick in.

No-allergen pasta, vegan croissants, meatless hamburgers—"free-from" food is one of the leading trends at this week's SIAL international food fair outside Paris, where companies say Europeans are starting to care as much about what is left out of their food as what goes in.

"Consumers have changed," said Elisabeth Leitner, export manager for Probios, an Italian company specialising in organic [products](#) and creator of vegan croissants, pointing to growing concerns about allergies and the environmental and health impacts of meat.

"There are more people leading alternative lifestyles. And people are talking about food and health on sites like Facebook and Twitter."

In France, four percent of people say they follow a diet free from gluten—a protein found in wheat, rye and barley—along with eight percent in Italy, seven percent in Germany and six percent in Spain, according to Mintel, a London based market research company.

Anti-gluten fever

Gluten-free foods are essential for people who suffer from coeliac disease, an auto-immune condition characterised by diarrhoea, vomiting and bloating after the ingestion of gluten.

However many consumers buy them simply because they perceive the products as healthier.

This anti-gluten fever has swept the United States in recent years and has earned increasing criticism for being a money-spinning fad.

"Gluten is to this decade what carbohydrates were to the last one and fat was to the 1980s and 1990s: the bete noir, the bad boy, the cause of all that ails you, and the elimination of which can heal you," Time wrote in a recent article on its website.

True or false, the trend is seducing Europe, where Mintel's research shows gluten-free products are on the rise.

Of all the food and drink products launched in Italy in 2013, for instance, 10 percent had a gluten-free claim—up 66 percent from the previous year. France, meanwhile, experienced a 28 percent rise from 2012.

The increase is such that companies who had launched "free-from" products years ago to no avail, are now re-introducing them to the European market.

"More than five years ago business was not so good," said Marcantonio Varinelli of pasta manufacturer Firma.

The company launched gluten-free products in the early 2000s but pulled them off the shelves due to a lack of interest.

But these goods are back this year and growing in popularity, both in the United States and in Europe, said Varinelli.

Food giants like Italy's Barilla are also offering allergen-free and vegan alternatives to popular items like pasta in countries where wheat has been a dietary staple for centuries.

Not just a fad

At the SIAL biennial show, where judges award prizes for innovation, Probios was given a special mention for its vegan croissants made with agave syrup and spelt, a type of wheat that is better tolerated by people with digestive problems.

Leitner said she believed this was a sign that France, a pastry-lover's dream, was open to different diets and lifestyles.

"France is king of the croissant, so we are happy to win the innovation title here," she said, adding that products like vegan croissants gave consumers the option to continue eating some of their favourite foods despite dietary restrictions.

Yannick Troalen, a trends and innovation consultant, said that going gluten-free was not just a fad, and the "market is much broader than we believe".

As such, many of the innovation winners from France were "free-from" foods, like the gluten-free croissants and pains au chocolat, or organic gluten-free pasta.

Meat-free

Other products at the expo included meat-free alternatives to popular products like hamburgers. French company Sojasun garnered two innovation mentions for their soy-based burgers and steaks.

Meat production has long been criticised for its detrimental impact on the environment due to the methane-belching animals and the energy intensive process of getting meat onto dinner tables, and consumers are starting to take note.

Even in France, where vegetarians often struggle to order at restaurants, meat sales have gone down seven percent between 1998 and 2012, according to consultants Nutrikeo.

But despite the move towards more restrictive diets, consumers still want a pleasurable eating experience.

Of five award categories including practicality, pleasure and health, the most important factor for the French was pleasure, according to SIAL.

"Indulgence is on the agenda in France," Troalen said.

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