

POLITICS AS USUAL: I'll have what she's having

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

I read recently about an appalling, yet not altogether unexpected trend in dining behaviour where patrons are 'faking', for lack of a better word, their food allergies to get special treatment in restaurants.

Diners asking for all sorts of substitutions or alterations to the dishes on the menu to get what they want regardless of how ridiculous or difficult it will be for the kitchen to accommodate them.

And should the server balk at such requests? Well, the request is framed as a life and death matter, due to a supposed food allergy.

So, to recap, apparently people are pretending to have a deadly medical condition so that they can get tomato sauce instead of cream sauce on their pasta? Really? Good god, why not just wheel oneself around in a wheelchair as well so you can get the 'good' parking space? You're already faking one medical issue, might as well go whole hog.

Honestly, that is just beyond appalling, but as I said, not unexpected.

Unfortunately, we now live in the era of me first, where everyone thinks they are entitled to special treatment regardless of their circumstances or even the context. And to make matters worse, their bad behaviour is rewarded.

You can't blame this on millennials; that age group that has been branded as the special snowflakes with outrageous expectations in terms of job prospects, etc. It isn't the 25 year olds that are demanding freshly squeezed pineapple juice in their mimosas instead of oranges; it's us 'older' folks.

Why the accommodation in the first place? Why do restaurants bend over backwards to accommodate every crazy request for substitutions and alterations? Because people have realized that they have recourse if they don't get what they are asking for.

If they don't get what they want, they raise holy hell. In person or online - both of which can hit a restaurant's bottom line. Negative social media campaigns that target particular outlets after a 'bad' dining experience have had tremendous impacts on the continued viability of those establishments.

And if holy hell doesn't work, then they threaten to sue.

And the threat of a lawsuit is not an idle threat.

Failing to address a diner's expressed food allergy - assuming it is in fact legitimate - is grounds for action at least civilly (where one can sue for damages) and in one recent case, criminally. A diner in Quebec has had a server charged for serving him salmon, something that he informed the server he is deathly allergic to. He took just one bite of the meal and ended up in a coma. So clearly he was not faking it.

But put yourself in the place of the restaurants. They are now put in the position of treating every diner's request as life and death or risk being sued. That's ridiculous. How in heaven's name are they supposed to deal with the myriad requests for changes? And how are they supposed to make any money? The profit margins on restaurants are already pretty slim; this just adds another barrier to keeping them afloat.

Let's just call this new trend what it is - selfishness. It diminishes the very real medical conditions of other people just so that you can get your own way.

I have a moderate food intolerance myself. If I accidentally ingest it, I can have a reaction that ranges from annoying to very unpleasant, but not lethal. I generally handle it by inquiring what is in the meal I would like to order. If it has something that can be easily removed (say pickles on a burger) then I ask if that can be done. If it has something that I know will cause a reaction I simply don't order it. I don't expect the restaurant to accommodate what can clearly be handled through common sense on my part.

I am not clear when we moved from viewing our preferences as rights but I hope it moves back to some semblance of normalcy, soon.