

The Must-Have Diets Every Restaurant Menu Should Cater To

By Eric Faber, Founder & CEO of US Restaurant Consultants June 2024

In today's dining landscape, restaurants aren't just competing on taste and ambiance—they're competing on *inclusivity*. Modern guests expect menus that acknowledge their dietary needs, lifestyle choices, and health goals. When a restaurant can confidently say "We have something for everyone," it widens its customer base, improves guest satisfaction, and strengthens its reputation.

Here are the core diets and dietary considerations **every restaurant menu should accommodate**—along with why they matter and how to execute them without overwhelming your kitchen.

1. Vegetarian

Why it matters:

Vegetarian diners represent one of the largest and most consistent market segments. Even non-vegetarians frequently order plant-based options for health or preference.

How to execute:

- Offer at least two entrées that are intentionally designed—not "afterthought" salads.
- Use proteins like mushrooms, beans, tofu, lentils, or egg-based dishes.
- Make sure soups and sauces aren't secretly made with animal stock.

2. Vegan

Why it matters:

Veganism continues to grow, especially among younger diners and those seeking sustainability-focused options. Vegan guests also influence group dining choices more than most other diet types.

How to execute:

- Build at least one signature vegan dish that isn't just a "subtraction plate."
- Use simple swaps: vegetable stock, non-dairy butter, plant-based milk, vegan mayo.
- Clearly label vegan items to prevent confusion and reduce server burden.

3. Gluten-Free

Why it matters:

Gluten-free diets are increasingly common—not just for those with celiac disease, but for guests with gluten sensitivities or lifestyle preferences.

How to execute:

- Offer gluten-free pasta or buns, and at least one GF dessert.
- Ensure fryer oil isn't contaminated with breaded items.
- Train staff to understand cross-contamination issues.

4. Dairy-Free / Lactose-Free

Why it matters:

Lactose intolerance affects a large portion of the population, and dairy allergies require strict avoidance. These guests are often underserved.

How to execute:

- Provide plant-based milks (almond, oat, soy).
- Offer dairy-free cheeses, creams, or sauces on request.
- Use olive oil or plant-based butter when possible.

5. Nut-Free

Why it matters:

Nut allergies are among the most severe food allergies and require clear labeling and safe handling.

How to execute:

- Fully label nut-containing dishes.
- Provide safe alternative ingredients (sunflower seeds instead of almonds).
- Ensure kitchen protocols for avoiding cross-contact are documented and enforced.

6. Low-Carb / Keto

Why it matters:

Keto and low-carb diets have become a regular lifestyle for millions of diners, especially in fast-casual and dinner environments.

How to execute:

- Offer bun-less burger options or lettuce wraps.
- Provide low-carb sides such as veggies instead of fries.
- Keep sugar out of sauces or provide alternatives.

7. Low-Sodium

Why it matters:

An aging population and more health-conscious diners have pushed low-sodium requests to the forefront.

How to execute:

- Allow modifications: “grilled, no salt,” dressings on the side.
- Use herbs, citrus, and aromatics as natural flavor enhancers.
- Highlight “lighter” or “heart-healthy” menu tags.

8. Diabetic-Friendly / Low-Sugar

Why it matters:

With diabetes affecting millions, guests increasingly expect low-sugar and carb-controlled options.

How to execute:

- Include sugar-free dressings or sauces.
- Offer at least one low-sugar dessert.
- Provide whole-grain and high-fiber substitutes when possible.

9. Heart-Healthy / Low-Fat

Why it matters:

Many diners—particularly the 40+ demographic—seek lighter options that won’t derail dietary goals.

How to execute:

- Feature lean proteins and grilled cooking methods.
- Use olive oil, not heavy cream.
- Offer simple, fresh, clean flavors without excess fat.

10. Allergen-Friendly Options (Shellfish, Soy, Eggs, Sesame)

Why it matters:

Food allergies affect more than 32 million Americans. Restaurants with clear allergen transparency earn immediate trust.

How to execute:

- Label all major allergens on menus.
- Maintain strict prep zones for common allergens.
- Build a reputation for taking allergy requests seriously.

11. Halal / Kosher (When Appropriate to Market Demographics)

Why it matters:

Some markets have strong religious-based dietary requirements. Restaurants that include at least one compliant option expand their customer base dramatically.

How to execute:

- Know your local market.
- Offer clearly designated protein options (Halal chicken, Kosher meats, etc.).
- Collaborate with certified suppliers.

How Many Options Should a Restaurant Offer?

A fully inclusive menu doesn't require 100 items—it requires **intentional representation**.

A strong standard is:

- 1–2 vegetarian options
- 1–2 vegan options
- 2–3 gluten-free options
- 1 nut-free entrée
- A few low-calorie/low-carb alternatives
- Clear allergen labeling across the entire menu

This balance keeps your kitchen efficient while ensuring guests feel seen and served.

The Consultant's Take: Why Offering Dietary Options Matters

As restaurant consultants, we see a clear pattern: **menus that adapt to modern diets outperform menus that don't**. Offering dietary diversity:

- Increases table-turn satisfaction
- Expands your reach to larger dining groups
- Improves your online reviews
- Reduces friction for servers
- Encourages repeat business
- Positions your restaurant as forward-thinking and health-conscious

Today, inclusivity is not an optional strategy—it's a revenue driver.