

Interview with Kim Koeller and Robert La France
Author of *Let's Eat Out! Your Passport to Living Gluten and Allergy Free*

Reader Views would like to welcome Kim Koeller and Robert La France, co-authors of the revolutionary allergy book series, "Let's Eat Out! Your Passport to Living Gluten and Allergy Free." Kim and Robert are being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Hi Kim, hi Robert...Thanks for talking with us today. We are excited to hear more about your innovative book series designed to expand the food choices of people with allergies. Would you give us an idea of what "Let's Eat Out! Your Passport to Living Gluten and Allergy Free" is all about?

Kim: "Let's Eat Out! Your Passport to Living Gluten and Allergy Free" is the first book series dedicated to eating around the corner from your home and around the world while managing 10 common food allergens including: corn, dairy, eggs, fish, gluten, peanuts, shellfish, soy, tree nuts and wheat.

Robert: The book is actually the foundation of the award-winning "Let's Eat Out!" series, which also includes three cuisine specific pocket-size guides and a multi-lingual food allergen phrase guide.

Juanita: What inspired you to write your book series? And, how did the collaboration process come about?

Kim: The inspiration for the book came from my diagnosis of over a dozen food-related allergies including dairy, fish, pork, shellfish and preservatives, lots of environmental sensitivities as well as celiac disease. Celiac is a genetic autoimmune disorder reflected in a permanent intolerance to gluten, the protein found in wheat, rye and barley.

When I was diagnosed, I was traveling about 80% of the time for my career with Accenture as an international business consultant and eating at home was just not an option. To make matters worse, I didn't cook so I didn't know anything about food preparation and ingredients. My choices at restaurants were extremely limited because I was unsure about what dishes were safe for me to eat. With a Masters in International Management, I wasn't willing to give up what I loved to do. I needed to figure out how to eat gluten and allergen-free anywhere across the globe. I researched hundreds of publications, websites, books and associations all over the world trying to find

information about how I could manage my diet outside the home and eat in restaurants. Unfortunately, there was very little information available anywhere so I established AllergyFree Passport® and GlutenFree Passport® to improve the quality of peoples' lives on a worldwide basis by providing pioneering resources for those managing specialized diets.

Robert: Prior to collaborating with Kim, I spent 13 years working as a restaurant industry professional and had a good understanding of the culinary principles involved with most international cuisines. As a person with a great deal of restaurant experience, my knowledge of food was something I took for granted.

When Kim and I would go out to dinner together, I helped expand her number of eating choices either by knowing exactly what was in each dish or by asking the waiter or chef a series of questions to ensure that the meal was safe. Through trial and error, we developed what we call the "cuisine-specific approach" to dining out. We had not intended to write a book series; however, we felt that our 3 years of research and all the information we developed was extremely valuable. It had the potential to positively impact millions of people worldwide living with special dietary requirements by helping them to regain a better quality of life. Creating and publishing our first-of-its-kind books, guides and websites has been the best way to get the word out and the global response has been incredible.

Juanita: What are the common food allergens, and what percentage of people live with one of the allergies you address in your book?

Kim: In an effort to be as comprehensive as possible, we have included the top eight food allergens which are responsible for over 90% of all food allergic reactions. These include: dairy, eggs, fish, peanuts, shellfish, soy, tree nuts and wheat. We also added gluten and corn to the list due to the dramatically increasing number of people negatively impacted by these allergens.

Robert: The number of people in the Western world that require an allergen-free diet is extraordinary. The Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN) estimate that over 12 million Americans have food allergies. With celiac, the prevalence in the US is 1 in 133; this means that there are 2 to 3 million people affected. If you factor in food intolerances or sensitivities and other conditions that benefit from adhering to an allergen-free diet, such as Type 1 diabetes and autism, the number of those affected is over 100 million Americans and over 300 million worldwide.

Juanita: Why is the number of people developing allergies so incredibly high? These common allergens are considered staple foods for many, what is causing this near epidemic?

Kim: There are worldwide research studies that are currently being conducted to assess everything from the proliferation of common allergens being increasingly used in manufactured processed products to the impact of genetically modified foods being introduced into our diets to better testing capabilities. Unfortunately, there is currently no global consensus as to why we are seeing an increased prevalence of food allergies.

Robert: We can tell you that there are a number of global factors leading to improved awareness of food allergies and celiac, which is bringing the issue more into the public eye. In the case of celiac, a landmark multi-center study led by the University of Maryland in 2003 determined that the prevalence of celiac in Americans is 1 in 133. Prior to the study it was thought to be extremely rare- about 1 in 4300 Americans! With food allergies, we are seeing an increased focus on health that is causing us to look at the cause of what is making people ill, rather than just treating the symptoms.

Juanita: What are some of the common concerns you hear from people with allergies, in their challenges eating at restaurants?

Kim: There is a portion of the community that feels that eating out is not an option because they don't have the necessary information or a level of comfort in restaurants. While we understand those concerns, we feel it is completely manageable. You need to educate yourself with knowledge and ask the right questions to ensure your food is safe to eat. Robert and I still eat out about 80% of the time, if I can manage all of my allergies, intolerances and celiac around the corner from my home or around the world...anyone can do it.

Robert: In addition, another concern that we hear a lot from people is that they think that restaurants don't care. This is not true. It's not that restaurants don't care; it's that they don't understand. There is a learning curve associated with managing an allergen-free diet. Just as an individual needs to learn what they can and cannot eat, a restaurant must also go through a similar process. It is important that we create a dialogue with the restaurant community to improve awareness and understanding of special dietary requirements. To do this, we must work on the ground level, with individuals effectively communicating their needs so that restaurant staff can become more familiar with special diets. We also consult with restaurants, culinary schools and hospitality professionals to help increase their awareness and understanding of these needs.

Juanita: What type of information do you provide that will help those with allergies, feel comfortable with restaurant dining?

Kim: For me, having the information at my disposal and knowing what specific questions I need to ask on a menu item by menu item basis gives me a great deal of comfort, confidence and freedom. As Robert said earlier, it's not that restaurants don't care; it's that they don't understand. What they do understand are ingredients and food preparation. If I can clearly address my needs on that level with the wait staff, my dining experiences are almost always successful and I consistently feel safe. Knowing what questions to ask the staff is really the key. The approach we developed really works and I am a testament to that...I haven't had a reaction from a meal in a restaurant in over a year and a half.

Robert: Knowledge is power. The more you know about ingredients and food preparation, the easier it is to dine out safely. Moreover, asking questions about specific ingredients and culinary preparation techniques puts the control back in your hands as a diner. The book series provides menu item descriptions so you know what is in each dish and what specific questions you need to

ask on an allergen by allergen basis. In most cases, there are only a few concerns per menu item you need to effectively communicate.

Juanita: Would you give us some insights into your international eating sections that truly make this series a passport to world cuisine?

Kim: We spent over three years researching and developing the series. We also went through rigorous quality assurance testing to ensure that our research was accurate. We conducted focus groups with over 20 individuals managing food allergies and celiac/coeliac worldwide to determine what information would be most beneficial to them. We also had two culinary experts or institutions review each cuisine chapter for accuracy. They confirmed our research and identified non-traditional culinary practices that we did not know about.

Robert: For instance, we had the former chef of the French Embassy in Rome review our French Cuisine chapter. He informed us that the use of peanut oil in French restaurants was very common, particularly in deep fryers. While an item like pommes frites (French fries) may seem safe for someone with peanut allergies, you definitely need to confirm that the oil used for frying them is safe for you. Additionally, we found that the seven international cuisines we cover in the series are rather ubiquitous and can be found all over the world. For instance, you can go to a Thai restaurant in Belgium and the menu will almost certainly contain Pad Thai, a standard rice noodle dish. While the menu may be in Flemish, the name of the dish is typically spelled phonetically. With this in mind, you can easily refer to the book to see what your personal concerns are with the dish. To further communicate your needs in foreign language speaking countries, you can refer to the translation section of the book or our award-winning *Multi-Lingual Phrase Passport* and just point to the phrases that address your concerns.

Juanita: What makes “Let’s Eat Out! Your Passport to Living Gluten and Allergy Free” the definitive resource?

Kim: We’ve been told by people around the world that the information presented in the nearly 500 pages of our full-color book and four pocket size guides is the most comprehensive and detailed resource available anywhere. It’s been called everything from a bible or an encyclopedia, to a compendium. In the book we discuss cuisines, give translation phrases and talk about each allergen. We detail what ingredients and preparation techniques to be aware of and what questions you need to ask to make sure that your meal is safe to eat. It’s all about education, communication and preparation.

Robert: Beyond that, we have information on airline travel, breakfast, snack and light meal suggestions, global associations and more. Even though we wrote the series, we even find ourselves using it as a reference. There is so much information packed into the book that we couldn’t imagine a gluten and allergen-free lifestyle without it.

Juanita: What has been the response so far to “Let’s Eat Out! Your Passport to Living Gluten and Allergy Free”? And, who is reading audience?

Kim: The response has been extraordinary. We constantly receive letters and emails from people who bought the series and say that now they have the confidence and tools to eat out again and have the quality of life that they had prior to diagnosis. The reviews from the book industry, readers, healthcare professionals, associations, hospitality industry and media have been so amazing and that our book series is now being distributed all over the world. The demand is continuing to explode and we are constantly being approached for foreign language rights to our series. In the coming years, “Let’s Eat Out!” will be translated into many languages across the globe.

Robert: “Let’s Eat Out!” is also an award-winning series. Our “Multi-Lingual Phrase Passport” just won Best Language Guide from USABookNews.com’s Best Books Awards, and the book was also a finalist for Best Health Book. We also have been recognized as a 2006 Benjamin Franklin Award finalist for Best Health, Wellness & Nutrition Book and Best First Book Non-fiction. Our audience is very large, not only for those affected by food allergies, and celiac/coeliac but also their friends and family who are trying to better understand their needs. We’re also finding that both the restaurant and hospitality industry as well as medical professionals are actively interested in our series so they may have the information to pass on to their guests, clients and staff.

Juanita: Do you find restaurants are becoming more aware of special dietary needs and the increasing incidents of customers with allergies?

Kim: While it is becoming easier to eat in restaurants, you still have to have the knowledge of your diet and the ability to effectively communicate your needs. While the advances to our cause have been significant, the number of restaurants that have a true understanding of food allergies still needs to grow considerably.

Robert: While we still have a long way to go before allergen-free lifestyles are universally understood and an accepted way of living, there have been great improvements in the restaurant industry. We are seeing more and more restaurants requesting guests to notify them of food concerns as well as offering gluten and allergen-free menus to their guests. There is also a growing movement to have hypo-allergenic food preparation stations in their kitchens to avoid the possibility of cross-contamination. We are also starting to see culinary schools start to offer courses dedicated to special dietary needs.

Juanita: What type of research did you do to prepare for writing your book? How long was the process?

Kim: We spent over three years researching and writing the book. We reviewed thousands of recipes across the globe to determine ingredients and food preparation techniques to be aware of. We incorporated personal experiences and feedback from over 50 focus group members into the series.

Robert: Again, quality assurance was very important to us so we had not only chefs and culinary experts review our material for accuracy, but we also had individuals impacted with food allergies test the material to see what worked and what didn’t. The index sections of the book required a considerable amount of time to compile, because we wanted to provide as much information we could find on a global basis.

Juanita: I've read many praises from readers of your series, that they feel it has brought a high level of confidence in their ability to eat successfully at restaurants. Would you comment on the freedom that your book series will inspire in readers?

Kim: Our hope is that the book series empowers people with the necessary knowledge required to eat outside the home, travel and explore the world. Too often, people feel like they have to be prisoners in their own home and had been experiencing social isolation as a result of their dietary requirement.

Robert: We feel that our book series provides an answer to people's concerns and gives them the confidence and tools to eat out around the corner from their homes and around the world. It helps to ultimately enrich and improve the quality of life for the people managing special dietary needs as well as their family, friends and business colleagues.

Juanita: How can readers find out more about "Let's Eat Out! Your Passport to Living Gluten and Allergy Free"?

Kim: If you have celiac/coeliac or have sensitivities to gluten and wheat, visit www.glutenfreepassport.com. If you have food allergies, intolerances or sensitivities to corn, dairy, eggs, fish, peanuts, shellfish, soy and tree nuts, www.allergyfreepassport.com is the site to visit. Both sites are also packed full of free educational materials, reference information and other resources for living a better life while managing a gluten and allergen-free diet.

Robert: You can also find our series in bookstores and health food stores around the world, on-line stores such as Amazon, eBay, global celiac and food allergy associations or directly from our publisher at R & R Publishing – www.rnrpublishing.com

Juanita: Thanks for taking the time to talk with us today. Your unique backgrounds and expertise have produced a fantastic book and series and we strongly encourage readers with food allergies and celiac to look for it in local and online bookstores. Do you have any last thoughts for your readers today?

Kim: Our ultimate goal is to raise awareness around the world to a level where gluten and allergen-free lifestyles are universally understood and supported. While we still have a long way to go in achieving this vision, we hope that our book series and educational materials help readers advance quickly in the learning process and give them more freedom to safely eat anywhere.

Robert: We want people to know that they can live a happy, healthy life while managing their special diets. It takes a little effort on the part of the individual impacted with food allergies or celiac, but in the end the results are well worth the work.