Nearly three years after the introduction of the allergen legislation, The Caterer brought together a round table of industry movers and shakers at Fortnum & Mason in London to discuss how easily and effectively it has been adopted. Rosalind Mullen reports

The law on allergens

In the UK, food allergies affect about 8% of children and 2% of adults. In December 2014, the law on how allergen information is provided by food businesses changed to help people with an allergy or intolerance when buying food or eating out.

The foodservice industry has to identify dishes containing 14 specified allergens used as ingredients for food or drink sold without packaging or wrapped on site. It can be provided either in writing (on a menu) or orally by a member of staff.

Where the specific allergen information is not provided upfront, there must be clear signposting as to where this information can be obtained.

For more information, go to: www.food.gov.uk

but we had to do the breakdowns at the last minute. We need guidance up front [on new legislation] and the time to deliver it.

Does the BHA give feedback to the FDA from businesses?

LA: I get feedback from the FDA that they want to keep it loose, but I go back to them and say caterers need guidance because some Environmental Health Officers around the country will enforce things in different ways. LA: I get feedback from the FDA that they want to keep it loose, but I go back to them and say caterers need guidance because some Environmental Health Officers around the country will enforce things in different ways.

So, the legislation has been onerous to implement?

Nick Smith (NS): I take an opposing view. When this [legislation] first came out, having to provide data to customers was a positive thing. We felt we didn’t need any support. As a company, we identify more allergens than the FSA. We built a system that was simple, made it interactive and the suppliers complied. I am not sure how much more information [the FSA] need to give us. Maintaining that data is a challenge, but there is no real difference than with pricing. I think we can overthink these things. We implemented it in three months and it’s maintained automatically. I find it easy.

Phil Hirst (PH): But some customers tell the server they have an allergy, yet they might still be served dishes with those ingredients. That is where it becomes an issue. It’s OK having it in the system – and clearly the legislation doesn’t cover all of the allergens, which is part of the problem.
We forget there is legislation that states you do not give people food they said they didn’t want!

Dr Lisa Ackerley

How do you manage a change in ingredients and therefore a potential change in the allergen risk? What measures are in place to make sure you aren’t caught out?

Janice Rockwell (JR): We carry out due diligence across the supply chain. It needs to be continually audited and monitored, and the responsibility put back on suppliers to ensure that they are following protocol regarding cross-contamination. There is always a risk with ingredient changes, especially where people are looking to cost-cut or re-source ingredients. There is a trust element that we are working with the right suppliers and have complete auditing of the supply chain. It goes across other areas of legislation, too, such as modern-day slavery. There is a duty for us to know who is making the product, where it is going from one supplier to another. We make it personal with our suppliers. They need to own the product. You need to buy what represents the quality and values of your business. You need to ensure compliance happens.

A survey recently claimed that two-thirds of consumers wanted more nutritional information on their menus and more menu transparency beyond listing those 14 allergens. Is this positive?

LG: We have that information readily available if guests ask for it. It goes back to having a balance and of not giving people any unnecessary information.

PD: If we create a new sausage, we send it off to the lab for our own due diligence, so we know we can say ‘there are no nuts in this’.