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Dianna Stampfer

Some of the most successful operations are born out of necessity or passion.

For Sandy Arens, both were driving factors in her founding of Alcona Brew Haus in Harrisville. The seasoned businesswoman and graduate of the culinary program at Schoolcraft College is also the mother of 10 – three of whom battle severe food allergies which require constant attention and awareness.

Knowing firsthand the challenges that come with feeding children who could literally die by ingesting certain allergens, Arens was determined to set her brewpub and restaurant apart with thoughtful options that cater to those with dietary restrictions or limitations.

According to a July 1, 2022 article on AHealthierMichigan.com (a website sponsored by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan), the Food Allergy and Research Education (FARE) reports that up to 32 million Americans are affected by food allergies and intolerances.

Of those, about 26 million are adults and 5.6 million are children under age 18 (one in 13 children) – and some 40 percent of those children are allergic to multiple foods or ingredients. Additionally, more than 40 percent of the children and more than half of the adults may experience such severe reaction such as anaphylaxis. And the numbers are growing at a rapid rate, both nationally and closer to home.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the prevalence of food allergies in U.S. children specifically increased by 50 percent between 1997 and 2011. Between 2009 and 2016, Michigan's saw a 179% increase in allergies. Of those with severe allergies, 50% are between 0 and 13 years of age (28% aged 5 to 13 and 22% aged 0-4).

The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America reports the nine foods or ingredients that cause most allergic reactions are milk, soy, eggs, wheat, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish and sesame – a rising food allergy (having been declared a major allergen in 2021), impacting an estimated 1 million people in America. Food

additives are also high on the list – things like soy, which is a common but often overlooked ingredient in many processed foods.

At Alcona Brew Haus, there are no peanuts, tree nuts, sesame or shellfish in any of the dishes – and such information is proudly stated on the menu. Arens sources fresh whole foods whenever possible, meaning less preservatives and the possible introduction of unknown or unspecified allergens. Given she also owns the local grocery store, those items are readily available. She even grinds her own beef for her hamburgers.

Arens offers gluten free options for pizza, pasta and sandwiches, given an estimated 1 in 133 Americans – about 1% of the population – has celiac disease and are unable to tolerate or digest gluten. The kitchen staff uses a dedicated toaster for gluten free breads, to avoid cross contamination. Even the dessert menu offers tasty options for those with food sensitivities or allergies.

The vegan dishes were developed (and taste-tested) after Arens sat down with vegan customers to get their input on creative and flavorful recipes like the smoked tofu, vegetable fried rice and avocado toast (the latter offered on the new weekend brunch menu).

How does Arens and her staff keep it all straight? Since day one, they have utilized a nationally recognized color-coded system for both the front (dining room) and back (kitchen) of the house.

“Purple was created as an allergy color for kitchens and several products are therefore available in purple,” says Arens. “I just happened to take it further to incorporate purple into every aspect we could for our allergy orders.”

This means that in Aren’s kitchen, there is a designated area where allergen-free dishes are prepared using purple cutting boards and utensils, exclusively. In the dining room, guests are asked before being seated if they have food allergies and

those who do are provided a purple menu. This serves two purposes – showing the guest the specific allergen-free options while also alerting the server (or Arens herself) that special attention must be provided.

Arens shared that one day a man came in with his family and ordered a basic salad, because traditionally it was the only safe thing he could eat at other restaurants. After she sat down with him and walked him through all the options on the purple menu, he quietly left the table. Thinking she had offended him, Arens later apologized to his family who assured her that he wasn't upset, he had gone to the restroom in tears – overwhelmed and happy that he was finally able to enjoy a real meal out with his loved ones.

It is this personal connection that Arens strives for. Those years struggling to feed her own children at restaurants with limited allergen-free options have turned into her culinary mission. Here, there are no eyerolls when a guest asks to substitute a dairy-free cheese, a gluten-free bread or ask for a meatless pizza. Each guest is treated special, regardless of if their menu selections are based on medical need or personal preference.

"Increasingly, a proactive approach towards addressing food allergens of guests is seen as fundamental in restaurant dining," says Justin Winslow, president and CEO at Michigan Restaurant & Lodging Association. "While a food allergen manager certification is no longer required by law in Michigan, we still recommend at least one individual in reach food service establishment receive a ServSafe food allergens certification because of their potentially life-threatening nature and the ever-increasing sensitivity by many Americans to certain foods served in restaurants."

While the previous Michigan bill which addressed allergen awareness has expired, a new federal 2022 Food Code was released in December featuring several significant changes including manager certification materials which include more information about allergens. According to the restaurant association, "there are also now two ServSafe allergen courses: one for the kitchen for those preparing foods (focusing on separating the allergy food, using dedicated workspace, purple cutting boards and knives) and the second course for the typical front of the

house – helping guests navigate menus and servers to answers questions, like what kind of frier oil is used.”

The building that houses Alcona Brew Haus was constructed nearly a century ago. In the 1940s, it operated as Alcona Beach (with 12 NEW cabins and a dining room – recommended by Duncan Hines), then as Muehlbeck’s Alcona Beach which was later known simply as Muehlbeck’s, a popular German restaurant that fed families for decades.

When Arens purchased the building in October 2017, it had been sitting vacant and deteriorating for 12 years. She spent a year-and-a-half rehabilitating the interior – replacing broken pipes and outdated wiring, creating an intimate u-shaped seating area where the previous front door was located, restoring the fieldstone fireplace, reconstructing restrooms and outfitting a door found in the basement into the entry to the brewhouse (complete with a glass porthole).

Alcona Brew Haus does not have gluten-free beer but does serve a hard cider, which is gluten free. The cider is sourced from St. Julian Winery.

She also repurposed one of Muehlbeck’s iconic fixtures – a giant wooden whimsically-painted stein – across the dining room entry and rebuilt the large horseshoe shaped bar to accommodate more guests. A covered outdoor patio was also constructed, giving added capacity during the busy summer months.

After opening in May 2019, Alcona Brew Haus was hit almost immediately with a season of road construction along U.S. 23, followed by the COVID lockdown in early 2020.

“Alcona is one of the oldest median age counties in the country and it locked down hard,” Arens recalls. “We weren’t even a year old, we are very rural and it

was the midst of winter, so we had to close.”

With no guests and subsequently no income plaguing the first part of the year, Arens looked for ways to weather the ongoing pandemic. Late that summer, she ordered igloos to provide social distancing with outside dining options for the upcoming winter season.

“When the second lockdown happened in November, we offered carryout while waiting for our igloos to arrive. They arrived just before New Year’s and we set up four on our patio. We were the only ones in the area with igloos, so they were well-used.”

Tapping into the growing interest in beer tourism around the state – especially for a small town like Harrisville (the county seat of Alcona County, with a population of a mere 437) – Alcona Brew Haus is now one of nearly 300 members of the Michigan Brewers Guild and is also part of the Sunrise Side Wine & Hops Trail.

Dianna Stampfler has been writing professionally since high school. She is the president of Promote Michigan and the author of Michigan’s Haunted Lighthouses and Death & Lighthouses on the Great Lakes, both from The History Press.

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