

## **'Making Food Allergies Your Business' podcast**

*Episode 3 – Businesses can do more*

### **Claire McGuigan & Jeremy Chan:**

**NARRATOR:** The contents of this podcast are for educational and informational purposes only. They are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice. Listeners are advised to consult with appropriate medical practitioners on the diagnosis, treatment, and ongoing supportive management of food allergies.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** Hello, and welcome to our third podcast in our series of *Making Food Allergies Your Business*. And today we have Jeremy Chan, who is a prominent Northern Ireland businessman and owner of 'Sinley' Chinese Cuisine in Cookstown. Jeremy, you're very welcome here today. Thank you for joining us.

**JEREMY CHAN:** Thank you for having us.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** Jeremy, it's lovely to have you here because part of the research I've been doing as a researcher at The Open University, Ireland is looking at how food allergy affects people in their daily life, also how they feel eating out of home. And then part of the research question was also around, what would they suggest that the food sector and the food businesses in particular could do to entice them to eat out more often?

So before we start and looking at the research questions and the themes out of the research, the findings of the research, I would just like to take this opportunity to let the audience know a little bit more about you. So if you wanted to let us know, we know that you have won the Best Chinese Oriental category in Northern Ireland takeaway awards for the second year in a row. So that's 2021 to 2022. So well done. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

**JEREMY CHAN:** What they do is they send judges out to judge you on your food, your service, the knowledge of the staff, the cleanliness of the shop, and so on. And to make a long story short, we got to the finals. Like anybody who enters a competition, you want to win, but there's a side of you that doubts yourself. And next thing came the announcements, and they said the runner up is such and such, and then the winner is ourselves. And I think I've lost my voice for about a week afterwards. [Laughter]

**JEREMY CHAN:** Yeah. No, that was the winning side of it. But to get there, we've been in business for around about 1974, '75 when my dad first started. And so, we've been in business a long time.

And so, we do know the catering side of things from the Chinese perspective for about 45 years. So, it wasn't a fly by night situation. It was something that's been progressing and progressing.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** So, could you tell us a little bit about how you managed to cater for the needs of the people with what we would say is the 14 European allergens that are covered in the UK?

**JEREMY CHAN:** How we started this whole journey was my dad had developed diabetes through old age. And through that there, we were going to the dieticians. And my wife had two friends who were actually celiacs. They approached Sharon's and look; I can't eat out. I've literally been living at home. And they didn't have the joy of going out to a restaurant and sitting and enjoying a meal. And so, my wife approached me and said, what can you do?

And during that time, I didn't really know what it was all about. So I asked the dieticians, and the dieticians informed me. I then decided I'm going to make this a personal challenge through learning and educating myself and then going through the different ingredients that we have that goes into each particular dish. I realized if I tweak this or find an alternative, and mind you, in those days, it was harder to find ingredients. So at the start, we were very limited to what we could do and couldn't do. But as time goes on, and we're now in 2022, ingredients are becoming more available, although Brexit hasn't helped matters.

That journey then I just cooked on a personal level. I never did it in a commercial side of things. But as I went on, I bumped into a few people, and one person in particular happened to be the Celiac Society in Derry. And I talked to him, and there, again, I was getting the same feedback about not being able to eat out and have an eat in and paying 5 pounds for a loaf of bread.

So I decided, right, if I make this, I'll see what it's like. I'll make this available and see. One particular customer that I remember was they were from Ballycastle. He was a long-distance lorry driver, but his wife was celiac. I don't know how he heard about us. I don't know what happened, but he was buying four or five meals at a time. And I said, like, is this for your whole family? And he started explaining the story. And I realized that I was creating a lifeline more so than I said, I didn't do it for profit. I just did it just two friends asking my wife to provide gluten-free meals.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** I think that's what's really key to the whole thing is that what we do find in the research is that people who have food allergies actually tend not to eat out of home and for fear and the risk of cross-contamination. But there are barriers there around the level of safety they perceive in the environment when they go in, if it's too busy, if it's noisy, if the understanding of the staff, all those sorts of things. But what we do find is that they do check out online and before they go, and they do a lot of research before.

And if the menus are online and they have the allergies listed, then they feel more informed to go to eat out. So, I was wondering really then in terms of you did talk a little bit about looking at your ingredients list. And I wonder then in terms of the 14 food allergens and how many of those can you cater for as a Chinese because it can be difficult.

**JEREMY CHAN:** It is. Out of the 14 allergens, our gluten-free curry meet 13 of them. And I just have to play around with it a wee bit more to meet that demand of the 14 allergens. And that one thing is we use soya. And our biggest difficulty is finding the ingredients necessary. For example, when we were making curry, curry powder is a mixture of all different herbs, and they grind it up and put it in. But if we were to buy a Malaysian-style curry powder, they would have ingredients in it that would not suit for celiacs.

And then if you go to a different type of curry powder and you can have two different curry powders, for example, say two Madras curry powders, but they will have maybe an extra ingredient or one that is not suitable. But yet they're still both known as Madras Curry powders. So, we stick to the same product. But to address the situation about the customers not knowing, I'm not feeling comfortable in small businesses. This journey for us has been roughly about 26 years. And when we started this here that I realized that this is a matter of life and death for customers.

I can't turn around and advertise that we're doing, I'm referring to curry here just purely because that's what's put us on the map. People's lives depend on this. Our staff was always amazed that we make our sauces from scratch. My wife has always been saying this here, like, people should know more about this.

And so recently, I've been taking advantage of Facebook. And what we do is we take each sauce; we explain to them the processes. We've had that curry recipe for about 60 years. And so, my dad's passed that on. There are three brothers. We work in the shop. And we went on that journey of developing this gluten-free curry and what we do is we make sure that each test, when they order, we scan the ticket that comes in.

We look at it, and we say, OK, if the customer has said that he wanted gluten free, we make sure that the side order that they asked for is like, say, for example, like fried rice, we had customers that are here who asked for a gluten free meal, but forget about the side order, whether it's gluten free. So, we make a point of just informing the staff and letting them know they've picked up on it. And thankfully, we have staff that has been with us, like the longest serving staff we have been with for 16 years.

Our managers have been with us nine years. So that's developed our continuity and they train all our other staff on that. And hopefully that rubs off and gives the customers the information that they need to help them stay safe.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** That is absolutely amazing. It's amazing to have a Chinese cuisine take away premises that can provide 13 out of the 14-food allergen safe meals. It really is fabulous because part of the research that I have done across the UK, people who have food allergy to nuts in particular or to dairy or to gluten will just say point blank, I don't go to Chinese restaurants. I don't take food away from Chinese takeaways or Indian or in Thai restaurants, which really limits their social mobility around where they can go out to eat and have a nice dining experience and even during the pandemic, their choice of food, and things like that.

So that is it's really fabulous to hear that. And maybe that will start to break down a little bit of that myth and the barrier around that. But what's really interesting about what you've described is it sounds as if you are purposely sourcing the ingredients, but you're sourcing it from the view as almost as if you've put yourself in the place of your customer who needs to have this food to be able to enjoy life and have the same social freedom as other people maybe in their family. And you've gone out of your way to source that.

And some eateries might find that if they couldn't source it and we know some instances during the research where people couldn't source, for example, an oil and maybe had replaced it with peanut oil over a salad dress. And one of the people who were interviewed in the study had said that or some of the other things that had been replaced by the chefs without the owner perhaps knowing because they needed to fulfil the obligations that were on the menu.

But you have taken the courageous decision to put out on Facebook that you actually couldn't deliver a gluten-free curry. And for some eateries, they might feel if I was to do that, I would lose business. How did that play out for you? And how did that make you feel as a business owner to do that?

**JEREMY CHAN:** In any business, we're here to make money. And I'm sorry for being very blunt about it, but the reality is that pays the bills. But I feel that it pays the bills even more if I'm honest. And by being honest to the customers, what's the sense of me saying that I'm doing a gluten-free curry and then they buy it? I'm actually going to lose customers because it's not going to be the right ingredients, and then they're going to suffer. So, honesty has always been a good policy to have, but it's I don't see it as a loss. I see it as a gain because that there is winning the confidence of our customers.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** I think that's a very interesting observation from your point of view as a businessperson, because that certainly came through very strong in the research that I had done, was that people were saying, the level of trust they would have within an eatery make them decide whether they would stay. And if they felt that they were valued enough and they had honest and open conversation and even if that meant that they had to check 1,000 times, they would come back. And it built the sense of loyalty, customer loyalty.

And I think maybe that's something that businesses maybe don't understand, that if they do that a little bit of hard work up front, that actually people with allergies don't dine out alone. They dine out in groups. And so, they might come back in twos and fours and fours and family events. Would you agree with that?

**JEREMY CHAN:** That's what I mean by building the trust and having faith. And when somebody actually experiences a bit of care, not only just the hygiene, but the care that we put behind our food.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** I think what's lovely about that what is I'm hearing from you is that certainly Chinese in Cookstown does put the care in the cuisine. And that's not just for the ordinary customer who doesn't have anything health wise to worry about, but for those people who have concerns with their diet choices for diabetes or for food allergies, that you have an inclusive menu. And I think that's sending out a very powerful message today on this podcast to people who are in similar businesses like you, and certainly from the people who we have interviewed as part of our research study who are saying, we wouldn't go out to eat in Chinese restaurants or Indian restaurants or Thai restaurants or have takeaway food from any of those places because we feel that there isn't enough information on the menu. We feel that perhaps whenever we ring up, there's not enough knowledge from the staff on the other side of the phone, those sorts of things.

So this is it's wonderful to be able to have you here today, to be able to say, look, listen, we're doing this, and we can be inclusive. I think one of the challenges perhaps, is to if we were to look at how you've made it inclusive, if we talk about the certain steps that the allergy customer, if you want to call them, would go through, so they will ask the question. But people are minded now that they think, well, allergies are here. They're here to stay. Why should I have to tell my story to the first waiter, the second waiter, the third waiter?

And maybe it's time where people say, hello. How are you? Do you have any food allergies rather than what would you like? And could you talk us through a little bit about how you've approached taking your orders and that communication between the customer at that first, because that's really the linchpin to securing your order, isn't it?

**JEREMY CHAN:** To answer that question, I have to actually speak from a personal level. I actually am lactose intolerant myself three years of going to different restaurants and so on. The most recent one, I was actually at a function and rang in and explained.

I even said to the event person who was having the event that I'm lactose intolerant. Can you pass this information to the restaurant and to the chef? And to be perfectly frank with you, I was actually a wee bit disappointed with the meal that I was presented.

And with that feeling that I have, because I'm in that line of business, I don't want my customers to have that feeling. I don't want them to develop that disappointment because the whole idea you've earned your wage. You've worked all week. You want to give yourself a treat.

You go out, and you've chosen to dine with us. We want to be an enhancement to your day, not a disappointment. You've worked hard for your money. You're more than happy to hand it to me, and I have to have that pride and be able to hand you out a meal that you're going to feel nourished and not worry whether you have an allergy or whatever.

We've always been trying to find new ways to train our staff to be more aware of these situations and scenarios. And some of our staff have allergies, and they understand. And then there's other staff who are beginning to learn. And we always have a supervisor that they feel that they can ask to. And if the supervisor is off that day, there's me. And we always try to guide them and hopefully through guiding them and directing them, that they will bring that across to the customer and win the customer's confidence as well.

You have a customer who's maybe on the whim. He decided, I'm driving past there suddenly. I want to get something to eat. I'm hungry. And you go in, and that's also where the staff training comes into play. When a customer comes in, if they've made us aware that they have an allergy or if they've ordered something like, say, for example, like a Compo which has nuts in it, we've trained our staff to say, look, that their dish has nuts in it.

And if that particular staff has forgotten to say that there and it goes into the kitchen, we always make a point for them to ask the customer again. And if the customer is not available or left to leave the building, for example, we normally wait till they come in or else we just don't make the dish at all until we get the right information before we can cook it.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** It's lovely to hear they have those safety checks in place where you have the first line of your communication into your business, where you're taking the order and the staff are trying to triage what the information is and know the menu and the ingredients and that. And then you have your second check in the kitchen when it comes in just to make sure, even if it's a side order, that it's not the same as what it's saying on the allergy check and things like that.

That's really useful because what we picked up in the research, things where people would have said if people come in and said they were perhaps vegan, there was a misunderstanding around the idea of the difference between a preference choice of a lifestyle with veganism as opposed to that you must not have an allergy. Do you find that when you're training new staff that is something that you really need to drive home, the difference between it?

**JEREMY CHAN:** We take all allergies as life threatening because you have to take the extreme. But there is a difference because there's people who have life choices that don't actually have a health issue. I can only use vegan as an example, but then there's people who have like, I have a friend who has an allergy to protein. So, they can't eat meat.

Their body can't process protein. What we do appreciate is if somebody informs us of their wants and dislikes or for that matter, like if somebody says they don't like onions, I can appreciate that, make your dish without onions. But if somebody says that they have an allergy, we have to take it in a serious matter.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** It's a big ask, isn't it, for a food business, really? There's so much regulation around it, and food allergies is only one part of the regulatory framework as such. In many ways, it's not included within, say, your scores on the doors, your five-star rating. And I think what was coming clearly out of the research was around that there was this call for an overwhelming call from the participants asking for a mandatory level of education for those who are working in the food service sector on food allergy specifically.

And what they talked about was really that it was a basic level that they would see it as. But whenever we went deeper into the research, actually what we were actually asking the staff was to have quite a lot of knowledge from end-to-end process from front of house to where the ingredients are stored, how they're supplied, if there's a risk of cross-contamination, cross-contact in the kitchen, right through to preparation areas, right through to cooking.

So, it was clear that the participants wanted this level of education. And not only did they want it, they wanted to see that these eateries were employing staff that had this level of education. And that would have given them almost a certain level of confidence to go and eat out. So they wanted that visible sign.

And one of the participants had suggested, which I thought was a neat idea, actually, was to look at the five-star rating that already exists. It's a universal process, and it's well known by everyone. And one of them was to maybe highlight one of the stars as say, purple for food allergy, if it was endorsed regulatory by, say, the Food Standards Agency or whoever else it needed to be involved in that with businesses.

Then that would give a level of confidence to the public to say these people in this particular business know about food allergies. Their end-to-end process has absorbed all the changes they possibly need, all the risks or perhaps managed within that as best as they can. How would you feel about something like that? Would you see that was doable or would it be adaptable to businesses?

**JEREMY CHAN:** Yes, I think, it is definitely doable. But from a business perspective on the scores and the doors, which is the star scoring that you're referring to, people were having

panic attacks and so on. But in reality, we were doing it already. Well, for me, from just hearing that there, I would be an open arm ready to embrace it because it's, again, from a personal level, I would like to know that the staff, when they're cooking my meal have the understanding and the wisdom on how to cook for somebody who is lactose intolerant.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** And so, it sounds as if in many ways, you would have a culture that's already established there. You have built your loyalty and your trust within your communication system with your customers. And really this would be just that visible sign then to the public that would be regulated to say perhaps that this is now visible. You can actually go to these places and actually feel or know actually know that the staff are knowledgeable on your allergies and things like that. So you don't see that it would be a barrier, really?

**JEREMY CHAN:** No, not at all. It's not a barrier. In fact, if anything, it's an enhancement to the business because the scores on the doors when they first came out, the customers were always talking about it, oh, did you see such and such? They have five stars. Or did you see such and such? They have one.

That's actually free advertisement in some ways. But when it comes to like, a purple star, as you mentioned, well, we have to use purple words for hygiene for when we're cutting. You have your yellow ones for cooked meats, you have your blue ones for fish, you've got your green ones for veg. And now they've reintroduced the purple board and the purple knife for cutting things like, say, if somebody has an allergy and whether it be egg or whatever, if you had chicken and you needed butter it and we use egg and if somebody had an egg allergy, we know that particular board is for that person and then go through the process of washing it down and sanitizing it and so on. So, we're doing all them things already as it is.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** No, it sounds as if it was a good idea for one of the actual participants had been a pot washer previously and worked in the kitchen when they were younger at college. So that's where they had got that idea that instead of reinventing the wheel and having another badge that industry had to grapple with, why not just embed it in something that was universal and everybody knew, which I thought was a good enough idea.

**JEREMY CHAN:** And as well as that, environmental health are the ones who are coming to give us the scores on the doors. And it's just a matter of them asking the questions and seeing what direction the chef takes them on and seeing how they prep, how they pack, and so on. And one of the things that we had to do, yes, thankfully, we had the space to do it, but at the same time, not all businesses.

Our where kitchen was not big, but we manage moved around a cook some equipment. We've designated certain areas for certain things, whether this is for pot washing. This is for veg washing. And that's already part of the scoring the doors.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** Mm-hmm. So, it sounds like what you're really saying then is business can adapt for food allergy.

**JEREMY CHAN:** Yes.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** They can find a way. But also, what's reassuring from the research that we've did at The Open University is really about the people who were saying that they wouldn't or couldn't go to eat in Chinese or have Chinese takeaway. I think what we've heard today here on the podcast, loud and clear, is that they absolutely can because they can certainly eat in your Chinese. And what would your message be then to other people in the Chinese community?

**JEREMY CHAN:** I was part of a healthy eating Chinese pilot scheme that the Belfast City Council had done. Behind that there was to try and get people eating healthier and creating healthier options and so on. The only headache that it creates is just finding a solution in your premises. Each person's premises is different. You have maybe somebody has a big kitchen; somebody has a small kitchen. There is the headache of creating a training package for your staff. And once you get over all of them initial set headaches, just take them as bite size.

My recommendation for any business is taking baby steps, designated areas, thinking about cross-contamination. For example, we use the separate walks to cook our dishes on. Yes, it's busy, but it's more important to take the time to make sure that customer is safe. You can't think about the money that goes into the till today. You have to think about having a lifetime customer. It's just changing your thought patterns and your attitudes towards it. It's thinking outside the box a wee bit, but not only just thinking outside the box, but communicating that over to your staff and to your customers.

And by likes of the score and the doors changing that there, which if that ever launches, I think, it's a fantastic idea. It's about longevity, especially nowadays whenever we have to deal with the high prices and so on, I find that customers who have allergies, they'll pay for a good meal. They understand that the ingredients that they need to use cost money.

And we don't have to promote ourselves. The food promotes themselves because it doesn't harm them. And then in the long run, we don't just get one customer. We get a family. And not only a family, but we also get maybe the whole family circle.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** So, it makes good sense to make food allergies your business every day, then?

**JEREMY CHAN:** Yeah, literally, yeah. And we've experienced that from a firsthand.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** Well, Jeremy, I want to thank you very much for coming to speak to us today and sharing all your industry expert knowledge on how you actually manage food

allergies as it is today. And you've given hope to other food businesses, not only Chinese businesses, but to businesses across the way, how they can adapt their systems or processes, how they can communicate. And the big take-home message is, I suppose for me, listening to you was to put the care into the cooking, and the rest really speaks for itself.

**JEREMY CHAN:** One thing is it takes five minutes to make a good omelette. It takes five minutes to make a bad omelette. [Laughter] It's just up to you.

**CLAIRE MCGUIGAN:** Yeah. That's true. That's true. Well, thank you very much, Jeremy.