



# Ask the Teen...

TESS ROSS-CALLAHAN (AGE 15)

No question this time - I have to share a personal anecdote of mine.

Recently my family and I went to dinner at this Mexican place we had never been before, and there was a brand-new frozen yogurt place next door. In my family, we have a take-no-prisoners sweet tooth, so we agreed to "check it out." After we finished dinner, we crossed the street and went in - where we were forced to stop and look around, confused.

There were a ton of people who appeared to be gathering in the back of the room, crowding around the wall. There was a cashier, but no obvious place to order. Instead of a traditional counter, there was an area open to customers with about 40 different kinds of toppings - wet and dry. There was no frozen yogurt in sight.

After a minute a woman noticed us gawking like flamingos who were expecting a bucket of fish but instead found a pile of cornmeal. "Is this your first time here?" she asked, and we dumbly nodded yes. "Let me show you around," she said, and we followed her as she led us to the back of the store.

As it turned out, the frozen yogurt place was one of the growing-in-popularity self-serve places. There were dispensers of various flavors of yogurt on the back wall and rows of cups. You were supposed to fill a cup with however much of whichever flavor you wanted, put on your own toppings and proceed to the cash register, where they would weigh it and give you a price. It seemed like a great idea. I got vanilla with ground peanut butter cups, noticing with pleasure that the labels for each flavor also indicated if they were gluten free or not. (Weirdly enough, the cake batter flavor was gluten free and the peanut butter flavor wasn't - making me wonder what the heck they use to flavor these things!)

When we got home I cracked off the plastic lid and took a bite of my ice cream and stopped. Whatever my topping was, it definitely was not peanut butter cups. I wasn't able to put my finger on what it was instead, but it was faintly familiar. My dad tried it and blinked. "Kit-Kat," he said, and handed me his instead.

As it turned out, the mistake had been made because there were no labels on the toppings and

frankly, one crushed-up chocolate candy looks like another crushed-up chocolate candy. The next time we went, I got chocolate chips (because those look pretty distinctive), but this time we were trapped behind a rabble of post-soccer-game 6 year olds. The kids managed to drop some of their toppings into almost every single other dish and also flipped some over their shoulders, where it nearly got stuck in my hair. However, the point was that there were cookie crumbs all over the chocolate chips, so I had cross-contamination to worry about as well.

The third time we went, I sucked up my courage and told the woman behind the counter that I had a food allergy. (I struggle doing this because it's embarrassing, but it's usually very helpful. Like this time. As you will see.) She pulled out an unopened box of chocolate chips from behind the counter and let me use some of them, therefore eliminating the possibility of cross-contamination. We asked them which topping was which before using it and soon enough it had become a habit and we had no more problems.

This is the rule of thumb that always helps me at self-serve food places: ask, ask, and ask a few more times. Obviously if you're going to eat an apple, you don't need to ask. You know your own diet. But there are some things that you might think you're sure of that you really aren't, like the difference between ground-up peanut butter cups and ground-up Kit-Kats. Even self-serve places will usually prepare your food separately if you need them to, get you separate ingredients if you need them and tell you what you need to know, as long as you ask. Of course, it's embarrassing and annoying to have to ask - it calls attention to yourself and feels like you're burdening the staff. However, something to remember - most businesses fear liability like you or I would fear the 2-week stomach flu. They would much rather have you tell them than make you sick and prevent you from coming back, or be held responsible. They have those little "TELL US IF YOU HAVE A FOOD ALLERGY!" signs everywhere for a reason. They want you to enjoy your experience there as much as you want to - so it really helps to suck up your courage, ask your questions and have a good time. It worked for me. Now I'm free to consume unfairly large amounts of frozen confections in peace. May you be as fortunate. Bon appetit!

If you are a teenager and have an issue, problem or question you want advice on send an e-mail to: [celiacsupportgroup@childrens.harvard.edu](mailto:celiacsupportgroup@childrens.harvard.edu) And put "Ask the teen" in the subject heading.