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# Leaving for College: How to Navigate the Dining Halls Once You Arrive

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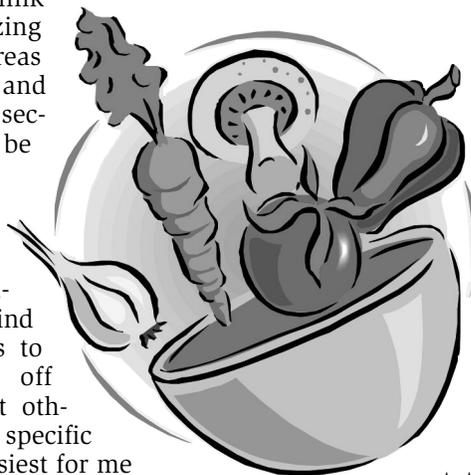
**B**y now, you've likely done your research regarding your college and feel (hopefully!) like you know a little bit about what to expect once you arrive. Maybe you already had a mid-summer orientation, or perhaps you spoke with the head of the dining services. In spite of what you do beforehand to prepare yourself, there are some steps you will still need to take once you arrive.

Dining halls can be overwhelming given the size of the space and the sheer volume of foods available. If you have not already spoken with dining staff about the labeling system, it would be good to ask someone as soon as possible. Just because a dish doesn't list gluten as an allergen, doesn't mean it isn't present.

Once you know the labeling system, it's good to think about categorizing the dining halls, areas of dining halls and your options into sections. There may be a specific dining hall, especially on larger campuses, that caters to gluten-free students. I find some dining halls to be permanently off limits, whereas at others I can navigate specific stations. It was easiest for me to put everything into "always," "sometimes," and "never" categories. The "always" stations include things like the salad bar and the grill. However, it is important to note that I only determined the grill was safe after asking the staff details about the options. Also in this category is the gluten-free freezer that had bread, cereal and other items stocked along with a dedicated toaster, peanut butter and jelly.

The "sometimes" stations include both stations where the dishes are

sometimes gluten-free yet sometimes not, as well as stations that have dishes that can be made specially. The entrée station, which is often the most substantial station, is one where it is "hit or miss" for gluten-free dishes. However, the Asian Wok station at my school, which serves mainly stir-fried dishes, can make me a gluten-free version in a separate pan with 20 minutes notice.



The "never" stations include some of the obvious ones like sandwich bars and pizza stations. However, it also includes things like the massive omelet station that also shares a griddle with pancakes and doesn't have clean pans available.

Figuring out which stations are safe and which aren't takes some time and patience; however, it has made my dining experience much easier now that I know which questions I need to ask at certain stations versus which stations I know are reliable. Advocating for your needs becomes vital, and sometimes, it will be necessary to talk to multiple dining hall staff before getting an answer that you trust to be right. After a little while, it will become second nature and will make your college experience that much more enjoyable!