

The proof of the 'free from' pudding is in the training

The food industry in the UK endeavours to produce many products that are safe for customers with food allergies and these products are referred to as 'free froms'.

For any food producer making products for the 'free-from' sector, there are plenty of challenges involved in establishing and maintaining the specification and control of supplies, and handling of ingredients.

When 'free-from' products are being produced in the same facility and on the same production lines as products that are making no 'free-from' claims, the challenge is even greater. However, as the UK's leading manufacturer of the county's traditional christmas pudding Matthew Walker has shown it is a challenge that can be met successfully.

Long tradition

Matthew Walker has been making steamed christmas puddings since 1899. The company has a client base that spans across the major retailers as well as its own brands, and all tiers from budget to premium. They make over 20 million puddings a year!

Matthew Walker became part of the Northern Foods group in 1992, in a move that saw huge investment in the company's Heanor factory in Derbyshire. Nonetheless, it still manages to retain the atmosphere and spirit of a family run firm.

Several generations of the same family have worked for the business, which technical manager, Sarah Dawson, views as a definite advantage.

"The company has always valued its staff and recognised that their contribution is fundamental to product quality," Sarah told International Food Hygiene. "We are fortunate that we have people working here with a strong family connection to the company, and a real eye for quality."

The traditional British christmas pudding can be made from a multitude of ingredients including dried fruits, suet, flour, bread-crumbs, beer, spirits, sugar, treacle and spices and, in some recipes, nuts.

Producing safe 'free from' puddings is a challenge which needs great care and when,



like Matthew Walker, you have a range of more than 280 recipes, the challenge can seem daunting.

Staff awareness

The company fully understands that in the production of 'free-from'/'allergen-free' puddings, staff awareness is fundamental, so training has been a big part of the company's approach to getting it right.

"If you are producing as many different recipes as we are, especially when this involves products that will variously claim to be free of any combination of nuts, dairy, gluten, alcohol, and so on, then it is not enough to just have good operational procedures," Sarah told us. "It is vital that staff understand and accept why it is important that we have those procedures, and how their actions should support what we are trying to do."

To this end, Matthew Walker recently commissioned allergen specialists from Reading Scientific Services Ltd (RSSL) to conduct in-house training at basic, intermediate and advanced levels for roughly 100 staff members.

"Although we had always provided training ourselves, having attended an allergen awareness course at RSSL, I thought it would be useful to bring an external perspective to reinforce the training we had given," Sarah added. "Sometimes, you need an expert's view on things. Our staff already knew of RSSL through the routine allergen testing it does as part of our cleaning valida-

tion and policy of positive release, so we knew that they would respond well to RSSL's advice."

Matthew Walker and RSSL worked together over three months to scope the learning requirement before it was delivered during an intensive week of courses. Delivering the training on-site helped to make the material more specific and relevant to the actual activities carried out by staff.

Excellent procedures

Of course, the good operational procedures that Sarah referred to are vitally important too.

Matthew Walker takes great care in working with suppliers to specify how ingredients are processed and handled before delivery and, of course, the company itself is meticulous in its storage, handling, and processing of ingredients. All lines are cleaned and tested prior to 'free from' production and special 'free from' equipment is used to identify clearly to all staff that this is the period when 'free from' is being produced.

Even items that do not come directly into contact with the pudding mix are nonetheless changed during this period.

Conclusion

There are many aspects to 'free-from' production, and the requirements will differ on a case by case basis.

However, the Matthew Walker experience demonstrates that even when a site is working to vastly different recipes, producing food for a broad range of customers that all have different requirements, it is possible to meet those demands with a well trained and motivated staff and clearly defined operating procedures.

The people who work at Matthew Walker 'eat sleep and breathe' the company and its products. The fact that they have now incorporated their 'free from' training into their way of working adds a whole new level of technical control and protection to the quality of their products.

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