

Many cafes, restaurants and coffee shops now have a barista style service, using coffee machines with steam wands.

Customers have a large choice of coffee made with a variety of dairy and plant based milks to their own personal taste. Syrups, sprinkles and toppings can also be added to increase the variation as customers find the perfect taste.



The Law

If a customer declares that they have an allergy, you have a legal duty to serve them a safe drink, free from the allergens that they have declared. Causing an allergic reaction to a customer or sending a person into anaphylactic shock due to poor procedures or 'mistakes' is unacceptable and is likely to result in the food business operator being prosecuted.

The issue

Many businesses do not have suitable and sufficient systems for cleaning the steam irons prior to preparing an allergen free coffee. The Food and Safety team visited 21 local businesses in 2024 asked them to prepare their coffee machine for service of an allergy free coffee. Tests showed that 19 out of the 21 businesses failed; that is allergens were still detected on the steam irons after cleaning!

What you must do

Whether you have a coffee shop, restaurant or café, you must conduct a risk assessment based on HACCP principles (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points). Once you have identified the hazards, you must put controls in place to minimise those hazards. In this case you need to consider whether you can safely provide an allergy free coffee to a customer.

If you cannot provide a safe allergy free drink: you do not have to by law. Can you refuse to serve the customer. But you must have assessed the risk first.

It is common to separate Dairy milks from Plant based milks and have a separate steam lance for each. It is advisable to use a separate dedicated cloth for dairy so that both steam lances do not get contaminated with dairy protein. However, the 'plant based lance' may be contaminated with other allergens such as soya or gluten depending on the milks available in your business. Some businesses have coloured coded cloths for each milk. This is not recommended as staff often become confused, use the wrong cloth and there remains a risk of allergens remaining after cleaning with contaminated cloths.

Note: Sanitiser wipes kill microorganisms, they do not destroy allergen proteins. Do not use sanitiser wipes when cleaning to remove allergens.

Procedures and Preparation

As part of your HACCP, you should have a written procedure in place for staff to follow when preparing foods for customers with allergies or intolerances. This is especially important if you have part time or temporary staff. Ensure this is an easy to follow step by step procedure so staff can be reminded of the actions to take to provide an allergy free drink.

If a person chooses an alternative milk, it is important to ascertain if it is a dietary requirement (e.g. intolerance or allergy) or simply a preference for that product. Ensure the person taking the order communicates clearly with the person preparing the coffee.

Step by Step Cleaning Guide for preparing coffee for customers with an Allergy or Intolerance

1. **Wipe the steam iron with disposable paper cloth** (e.g. blue roll) to remove any visual contamination.
2. **Thoroughly wash your hands** to remove any trace of allergens.
3. **Purge the steam iron.** To remove any remaining milk from the head of the lance.
4. **Wash the steam lance in hot soapy water using a clean cloth.** This will help remove protein residue.
5. **Leave the steam iron with soapy water for at least 20 seconds.** This will allow the chemicals to lift stubborn proteins remaining on the exterior of the iron.
6. **Purge the iron into the soapy water.** This cleans the inner tip of the iron.
7. **Wash the button** used to operate the steam iron with hot soapy water.
8. **Wash your hands.**
9. **Rinse the steam iron in clean water, purge the iron to remove any soapy residue in the tip.**
10. **Wipe the steam iron with fresh disposable paper cloth** (e.g. blue roll)
11. **Prepare your allergy free coffee.**
12. **Ensure the allergy free coffee is handed to the person who ordered the coffee.** If there are a number of similar looking coffees in the order, you may wish to ensure that the coffee is easily recognisable from the others.



Other steps to take.

Have dedicated colour coded jugs for the various milks that you offer. You can further reduce the risk to the consumer by protecting cups, teaspoons and other utensils from accidental contamination such as touching with contaminated hands or milk splashes which may be used to make or serve coffee. We strongly advise keeping these stored safely away from other sources of contamination. This could be in a dedicated, clearly labelled, plastic lidded container e.g. 'Allergen box'. Cups & utensils in this box should ideally be hand washed in warm soapy water as some dishwashers are not effective in the removal of allergen proteins.

Talk to the customer about the potential for allergen contamination and how you can mitigate the risk by following a strict procedure. Explain what you can do and what is not possible. Give accurate information to allow the customer to make an informed choice.

Finally

If you are in any doubt as to whether you can provide the allergy free drink requested, offer the customer an 'Americano' coffee (only coffee and hot water) and allow them to put the desired milk in themselves, pouring directly from the carton. Provide them with a cup and spoon or stirrer from the allergen box.

Further information

