



A BRUTALLY HONEST CONVERSATION ABOUT YOUR COMPLIANCE THIS CHRISTMAS

What 500+ diners told us about Alcohol, Allergens and Trust

Every December, the UK's pubs, bars, restaurants, late-night venues and delivery platforms are hit with the same tidal wave: work Christmas dos, family get-togethers, "one more round" drinks, and celebration dining.

It's brilliant for trade, but it's also one of the riskiest times of the year for compliance.

Serve Legal surveyed over 500 respondents on festive dining and hospitality habits. The results tell a very clear story: December is louder, faster, and more stressful — and that pressure directly increases the risk around allergens, dietary requirements and responsible service.

This isn't about **red tape**

It's about people, safety, and trust.

Data gathered from Serve Legal Auditors. November 2024. 502 Respondents.



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The Festive Surge

Nearly **half of respondents** (48%) say they eat from restaurants or delivery services **more often in December** than usual.



That means you're not just serving your regulars. You're serving a number of customers with allergies who usually avoid eating out, but they don't want to be the only colleague not at the staff party, or the awkward partner who can't attend the family meal.

And the baseline is already busy. Across the wider year:

18%

order from/dine at
restaurants **multiple**
times a week

33%

order from/dine at
restaurants **once a**
week

31%

order from/dine at
restaurants **multiple**
times a month

Hospitality is not an occasional luxury anymore; for a huge share of customers it's routine. When that routine accelerates in December, any weakness in process increases with it.

December will identify any gaps in your allergen, dietary, and service training if it is "good enough most days." This could lead to reputational damage and occasionally, fatalities.

Alcohol Consumption Goes Up

and so does service responsibility

61%

of respondents say they **drink more alcohol** over the holiday period.

Only 2% say they drink less.

More alcohol = more judgement calls for staff, including:

- Refusals
- Safeguarding vulnerable customers
- Escalation and intervention
- Maintaining safety procedures (such as Ask for Angela)
- Managing intoxicated groups who may be louder, more impatient, and less clear when communicating needs

Alcohol and Allergens aren't friends

From a food safety perspective we know that communication is where clarity needs to lie. We also know that alcohol can blur clarity.



This matters even more when we look at allergens and intolerances because people with genuine risk profiles are out in December even if they typically avoid it.

People with allergies still don't *fully* trust restaurants

Let's look at the dietary landscape from the survey.

Dietary profile of respondents (Multiple answers allowed if applicable)

- **7%** reported a food allergy
- **11%** reported an intolerance
- **12%** reported another dietary requirement (for personal, ethical, or religious reasons)
- **74%** reported none

— That's nearly **1** in **3** customers —
with some form of dietary requirement.

Now layer in this reality: 70% of people said that staff do not treat non-allergy requirements (e.g. intolerance, religious restriction, vegan) requirements as seriously as allergies.

Read that again. Most customers who ask for care don't believe you'll take them seriously unless they use the word "allergy".

Because here is the critical operational truth:

- Many “intolerances” produce severe physical reactions (e.g. lactose intolerance can mean violent sickness mid-service).
- Religious requirements (halal, kosher), ethical requirements (vegan), and personal exclusions aren’t optional for the customer. If you dismiss them, they feel dismissed and they tell people.
- Guests often simplify or under-report their needs because they don’t want to make a fuss in front of colleagues. Your staff need to open that conversation and make it feel like a priority to the customer.



December creates the **exact social environment** where people are least likely to advocate loudly for themselves, and most likely to get hurt if you don’t advocate for them.

Your staff think they're doing it... but are they doing it at the right moment?

We asked respondents when, in their real dining experience, they're asked about allergies.

There were two big takeaways here:

Customers overwhelmingly want you to ask first.

Only 3% of people think it's acceptable to leave allergy disclosure to the customer.

Asking at food order is already too late in some cases.

If the venue cannot safely cater, the guest should not have been seated, should not have started drinking, and should not now be in a position where they're having to leave the table in front of other guests. That's humiliating for them, and reputationally brutal for you.

It's smoother, more professional, and safer to **surface allergen constraints early**, not as an awkward scramble at mains.

“ I am vegetarian by choice, allergic to shellfish and also gluten intolerant. I sometimes get asked by servers whether I am a coeliac or 'just intolerant', which is very annoying and patronising and implies they don't think they need to be as careful.

”

Pressure demands process

Respondents were very clear about what they expect venues to do to prevent harm. These aren't niche demands or gold-plated measures.

They're basics. Here's what our respondents said:

“Make sure staff are fully trained on which food items contain allergens, and on the consequences of cross-contamination.”

“Ensure that there are concrete procedures in place to prevent cross-contamination or misunderstanding of what is wanted in the food.”

“Ensure everyone is trained, and they double or triple check orders. Listening correctly and avoiding being rushed is crucial, as rushing can lead to mistakes.”

“Be more proactive with asking if the customer has any allergies first. Repeat orders back to customers and label drinks if they are for an allergy user.”

Volume goes up, noise goes up, alcohol goes up, table sizes go up, and customer expectations go up.

That combination, celebration plus strain, is exactly when **staff most need to slow down for 10 seconds** and verify.

SO

What you should be doing now, before December hits?

Here's what best-practice operators are already doing, and what we assess in our compliance programmes at Serve Legal:

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1

Train your front-of-house to lead, not react.

Every single team member should confidently ask, early and consistently:

- "Do you have any allergies or dietary requirements we need to be aware of today?"
- Not "any allergies?"
- Not "you're all fine, yeah?"
- Not "nothing serious, is it?"

You're gathering information, not seeking reassurance.

2

Treat intolerance and non-allergen requirements with respect.

If a guest says "I'm lactose intolerant", the correct response is not "So is it okay if there's just a bit of cream?"

The correct response is: "Thank you for letting me know. I'll check that with the kitchen and come back to you."

Because if you make that person ill at the Christmas party in front of their colleagues, they will not quietly protect you.

3

Slow down order confirmation.

For any table with an allergy/intolerance/strict requirement:

- Repeat the order back.
- Tag the order clearly.
- Label food and drinks at handover.
- Make sure the server delivering the dish knows which plate is safe and who it belongs to.
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If the wrong gravy lands in front of the wrong person, “the chef knew” is not a defence

4

Be honest if you can't safely serve.

It is far better to explain limits upfront than to improvise.

Customers do not expect you to be able to do everything, but they do expect you to be straight with them.

5

Refresh allergen knowledge for seasonal menus.

Festive specials, batch sauces, sharing boards, canapé trays, mulled syrups — these are rarely part of day-one training, and they change year to year.

Everyone working the floor needs to know what's in them and where the risk is.

6

Keep alcohol compliance tight.

With 61% of guests drinking more in December, you must:

- Check ID for alcohol sales consistently, even when the bar is three deep.
- Be prepared to refuse further service when needed.
- Watch for vulnerable guests in mixed-age groups.

If your December staffing model leans on temporary or casual workers, they need to be trained to the same standard as long-term staff.



The hospitality sector knows how to deliver magic at Christmas.

You do it every year.

The challenge now is to deliver safety with the same energy.



Serve Legal works year-round with operators to test real-world performance at the point of service — from ID challenges on alcohol and vapes, to allergen handling, to Ask for Angela stress tests, to escalation under pressure.

We don't ask "what's your policy?". We show you what actually happened at 7:40pm on a slammed Friday when a staff member was three tables behind and a guest said, quietly, 'I'm allergic to nuts'.

That's the moment that matters.

If you want support pressure-testing your Christmas readiness, allergen processes, staff responses, ID compliance, order-handling and escalation, talk to us now, not after an incident.

Because "sorry, it was hectic" is not going to hold up in January.