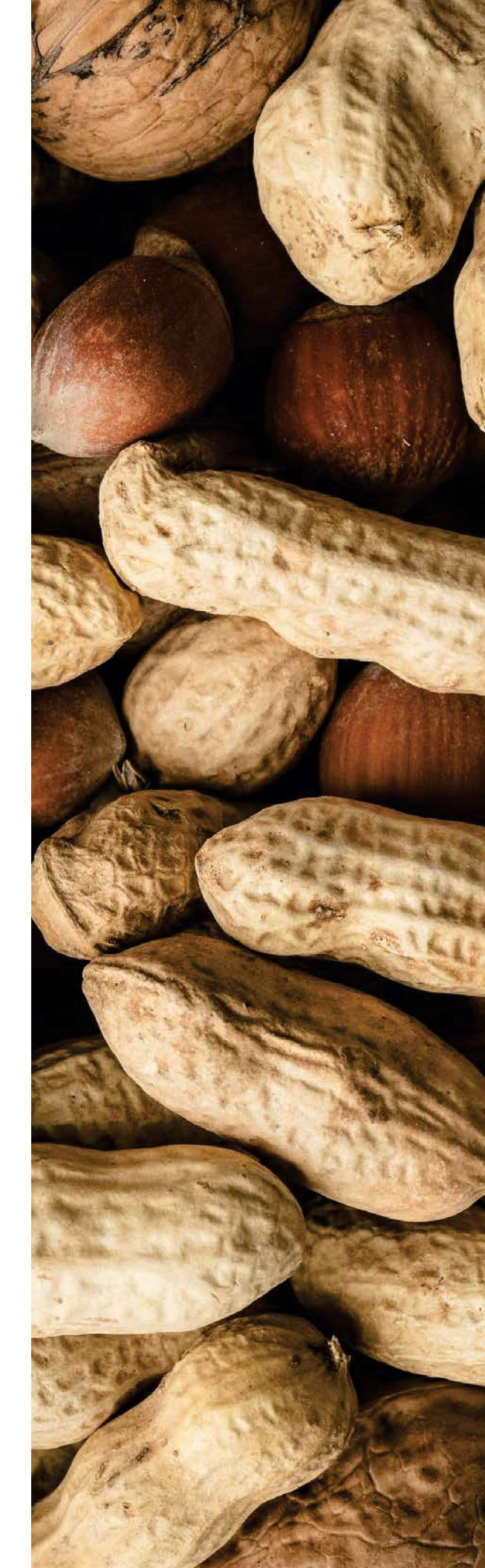




Breaking the Allergy Stigma:

Cooking with Peanuts, Confidence, and Care

When peanuts are used thoughtfully with proper labelling, good systems, and trained staff, they remain a powerful tool in the chef's repertoire, writes Dr Carmen Muller, Dr Beulah Pretorius & Prof Hettie Schönfeldt, University of Pretoria

Every chef has a handful of ingredients that demand extra respect in the kitchen. The peanut is one of them, not because it is difficult to work with, but because it deserves to be handled with intention. It delivers richness, balance, and depth of flavour, works across cuisines, and remains one of the most cost-effective and sustainable sources of protein available to us.

At the same time, peanut allergy has become part of everyday kitchen reality. Not as a reason to avoid peanuts altogether, but as a reminder that professionalism today means knowing your ingredients inside and out, including how they affect the people we serve. The modern chef's task is not to cook with fear, but with knowledge: to understand where the risks lie, how to manage them, and how to communicate clearly with both the team and the guest.

When peanuts are used thoughtfully with proper labelling, good systems, and trained staff, they remain a powerful tool in the chef's repertoire. This is about cooking with confidence, protecting those who need it, and continuing to honour an ingredient that has earned its place on the plate.

From perception to reality

In recent years, peanuts have acquired a reputation that often outweighs the science. Peanut allergy is widely discussed, highly visible, and sometimes misunderstood. While allergic reactions can be severe and must always be taken seriously, the reality is that peanut allergy affects a relatively small proportion of the population. Most diners can safely consume peanuts, and for many South Africans, peanuts remain an important and affordable source of nutrition.

For chefs, this matters. Removing peanuts entirely from menus may feel like the safest option, but it can also be an unnecessary one. More importantly, it shifts the focus away from where the real responsibility lies, not in eliminating ingredients, but in managing them properly.

Understanding what we are managing

Peanut allergy is not a preference, intolerance, or trend. It is an immune response in which the body reacts to peanut proteins as if they are harmful. For those affected, even

trace amounts can trigger symptoms ranging from mild skin reactions to anaphylaxis, a life-threatening emergency.

This is why cross-contact, not just direct use, is the critical issue in professional kitchens. A spoon reused between sauces, a chopping board not cleaned thoroughly, or oil shared across dishes can all transfer enough protein to cause harm. Good kitchens already understand this principle – the same discipline applied to food safety, hygiene, and temperature control, also equally applies to allergens.

The way we think about peanuts has also changed outside the kitchen. For many years, parents were advised to delay introducing peanuts to infants. We now know this advice was well-intentioned but misguided. Strong scientific evidence shows that introducing peanut-containing foods during early weaning can significantly reduce the risk of developing peanut allergy later in life.

This shift is important because it reframes peanuts not as a food to be feared, but as one that benefits from informed, early, and appropriate exposure. Avoidance, whether in homes or in food systems, does not necessarily reduce risk – knowledge does.

What this means on the floor and in the kitchen

For chefs, responsibility begins with clarity. Clear menu descriptions and allergen labelling build trust long before a dish reaches the table. When a guest asks about allergens, confidence matters more than perfection. Knowing what is in a dish, how it is prepared, and where the risks lie allows staff to respond honestly and professionally.

Behind the scenes, systems matter. Separate storage where possible, clean preparation surfaces, dedicated utensils for allergen-free meals, and clear communication between front and back of house all reduce risk. These practices do not complicate service, they strengthen it.

Equally important is staff training. Every member of the team should understand what a peanut allergy is, why cross-contact



is dangerous, and what steps to take if a reaction occurs. A calm, informed response can make the difference between a close call and a crisis.

Handled responsibly, peanuts offer enormous value. They enhance flavour, add texture, and support plant-forward cooking. They are affordable, accessible, and environmentally efficient. In a country where food security and sustainability are ongoing concerns, peanuts deserve a place in the conversation.

Fear should never erase function.

Removing peanuts from menus because of misunderstanding risks losing both cultural heritage and nutritional opportunity. The goal is not to choose between safety and creativity, but to allow them to coexist.

Leading with confidence

Chefs influence how food is understood. The way we handle ingredients shapes consumer trust, industry standards, and future food culture. By treating peanuts with respect

rather than anxiety, and by grounding our practices in science and transparency, we can protect allergic diners while continuing to cook boldly and responsibly.

Peanuts are not the enemy. Poor communication and weak systems are. When kitchens lead with knowledge, peanuts remain what they have always been, which is a powerful, versatile ingredient, worthy of a confident place on the menu.

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Cooking with Care

Label Clearly – Always indicate the presence of peanuts or peanut-derived ingredients on menus, packaging, and buffet labels. This builds trust and reduces the risk of accidental exposure.

Prevent Cross-Contact – Use separate utensils, chopping boards, and preparation areas where possible. A small amount of residue can trigger a reaction in sensitive individuals.

Train Your Team – Kitchen and service staff should know what to do in the event of an allergic reaction. A simple, well-communicated action plan can save lives.

Communicate with Confidence – When a guest enquires about allergens, respond with assurance and clarity. If peanuts are used, explain how they are handled safely and suggest alternative dishes when needed.