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- [Dance](#)
- [Film](#)
- [Gay & Lesbian](#)
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- [Kids](#)
- [Music](#)
- [Opera & Classical](#)
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Kids

Food for all

A local cook satisfies an appetite for allergen-free dining. By Amy Carr



FIRE UP Lisa Williams shows Dominic Guzzarde how to put the finishing touch on crème brûlée. Photo: Amy Carr

Dominic Guzzarde took one bite of the egg roll and knew something wasn't right. The then 9-year-old spit it out immediately, chalking up the problem to a funny taste. His parents thought nothing of it until four hours later, at baseball practice, when a teammate ran up to his dad and said, "Something's wrong with Dominic."

The egg roll had been fried in peanut oil and, unbeknownst to the Mount Prospect family, Dominic suffered from a life-threatening peanut allergy. They rushed him to the hospital, where he broke out in welts and began itching and vomiting. He was hot and couldn't breathe, as if he were suffering a severe asthma attack. "His face was gray," his mother, Mary Guzzarde, recalls. "It was like death was coming. It was scary because it was right in front of you and there was nothing you could do. I felt helpless."

After emergency visits to Northwest Community Hospital in Arlington Heights and Children's Memorial Hospital, Dominic, now 13, survived the attack, but the family's eating habits haven't been the same since. They take extreme precautions to avoid peanuts and anything that's come in contact with them. And, still haunted by the egg-roll incident, they avoided all Asian food—until they met Lisa Williams.

Williams, a food-allergy specialist and cook, changed the Guzzarde family's outlook on Asian food by teaching them how to prepare it safely (and deliciously, they say) at home. She's devoted her life to helping people like Dominic eat without fear and has recently partnered with chefs at restaurants including Carnivale and BOKA to offer Safe and Sound dinner events—multicourse meals prepared without gluten or any of the eight major food allergens (milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, soy and wheat). She offers advice and recipes on her website (lisacooksallergenfree.com), regularly leads cooking demonstrations around town, and, as she did for the Guzzardes, offers in-home cooking classes.

Williams taught the family how to prepare pork and ginger pot stickers (handmade by Dominic and his 9-year-old brother, Matthew), chicken fried rice and crème brûlée (a special non-Asian request from the kids).

"I loved it," Dominic says. "The food was great because it was Chinese, which I haven't had in years."

Williams provides a service more and more parents need. A recent study published in the journal *Pediatrics* found food allergies increased 18 percent between 1997 and 2007 and now affect 4 percent of all kids in the United States.

It's a life-altering challenge for many adults who learn later in life that they, too have allergies, as Williams knows firsthand. "Two years ago, I was 250 pounds, miserable and sick with gastrointestinal issues," she says. Then she discovered she suffered from allergies to wheat, dairy, sugar and food dye. "Before this, I never cooked. But once I was diagnosed, I said some things were going to change."

After losing 100 pounds along with her job as an account executive for a subprime mortgage lender, Williams enrolled in culinary school and set out to change the way people think about food allergies. Her cooking demonstrations at area Whole Foods stores, museums and other locations focus on in-home cooking, but Williams hopes to offer more Safe and Sound dinners (she did four over the last year) to increase awareness among local chefs and

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provide delicious and safe nights out for a group of people who often live in fear of restaurants.

The Guzzardes aren't quite ready to venture to an Asian restaurant yet, but Williams's class was a breath of fresh air. "It's kind of nice to eat something besides tomato sauce," Mary says. "This food is considered taboo to us and now it's not. [Dominic] can feel like he can eat like everybody else."

To arrange a cooking class or find a list of Williams's demonstrations, visit isacooksallergenfree.com. The next Safe and Sound dinner is February 9 at [Landmark Grill](#).

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