In a study published recently in the American Journal of Gastroenterology, the authors (Lena Bohn and others) reported on the effects of various food products on the symptoms in 197 patients with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). The following will summarize their important findings:

84% of the individuals surveyed reported symptoms related to one or more of the following products:

1. Incompletely absorbed carbohydrates reported in 70% of the individuals:
   - Dairy products (milk, yogurt, cream cheese, cream soups, cottage cheese ...) in 49%
   - Beans and lentils in 36%
   - Apple in 28%
   - Flour in 24%
   - Plum in 23%

2. Foods rich in biogenic amines experienced by 58% of the individuals:
   - Wine and beer in 31%
   - Salami in 22%
   - Cheese in 20%

3. Foods causing an allergic response with release of allergy mediators (Histamine):
   - Milk in 43%
   - Wine/beer in 31%
   - Pork in 21%

4. 52% of individuals reported symptoms after eating fried and fatty foods particularly in patients with excess gas and diarrhea.

5. Preservatives-containing products such as sulfites and benzoic acid. The mechanism by which these products produce symptoms remains unclear.
6. Hot and spicy foods can produce symptoms due to their contents of capsaicin, a product responsible for the hot taste of products such as red pepper. 40% of patients in this study reported symptoms after eating hot or spicy foods. Capsaicin in particular can provoke pain due to a direct irritation of the nerves of the gut.

Symptoms tended to be more frequently reported by females and among other things included disturbed night sleep pattern and low energy level. The food-related symptoms occurred independent of a person's age, his/her body weight, and independent of anxiety or depression.

In conclusion food intake is reported to be problematic for most patients with IBS. This list, along with the FODMAP-poor diet (see Irritable Bowel Syndrome Diet: Avoiding the FODMAP under Patient Education), should give the reader a glimpse into the complexity of understanding IBS and the relation of symptoms to diet. This also explains the difficulty of pinning down a particular food products as a cause of symptoms in individuals with IBS. We do not recommend that one should avoid all these products. The more rational approach would be to have these lists available for review, to do so when symptoms occur and to try and create a list of offending products that are specific to you, and steer away from them.

Remember that avoiding offending agents is one part of the equation. If gas and bloating is a problem, using anti-gas products (activated charcoal) intermittently as well as the regular use of probiotics (Align, ColonHealth, Culturelle, Florastor, Activia ...) and to alternate among those products, can help improve the bloating symptoms. If this approach does relieve the bloating, a week's course of a gut-specific antibiotic would help reduce the number of offending bacteria which may be responsible for the gas production.