

Gluten-free and feeling better

Written by By CINDY WELCH, Food Columnist
Friday, 20 February 2009 14:58



The warm smell of yeast bread. The crisp shatter between your teeth of a delicate pastry crust. The chewy texture of a warm chocolate chip cookie. The moist crumb of a sweet pound cake. All of these are made from the combination of three basic ingredients - flour, fat and sugar. It is amazing that by adding leavening and flavorings, these three ingredients can be used to form a myriad of baked goods.

As a cook, my favorite task is baking. I enjoy making both sweets and bread items. As a carb lover, I could live on a white, crusty bread with butter accompanied by some great cheese and fruit. Cookies are such a temptation that I can't bake them much for myself. Cakes are becoming more and more fun to make as I prepare them for the special times in the lives of family and friends.

But, I can't eat a single one. A year ago my life changed when my sister told me that she had been diagnosed with Celiac Disease, an autoimmune disease caused by her intolerance of gluten which is found in wheat, rye and barley. She went on to tell me that it is often hereditary and shared by siblings.

Because your body is unable to properly absorb nutrients, the symptoms can include everything from stomach ailments, to skin disorders, to fatigue, to infertility and some believe even autism in children. For many years I have suffered with fatigue and body pain attributed to fibromyalgia. Now I believe, after striving to eat gluten-free for about nine months, that many of my symptoms are also gluten-related.

So, what is gluten? It is a water-insoluble complex protein that is found in the major grains, such as wheat, rye and barley and other hybrid forms of wheat. Gluten provides the elasticity and stretch needed to allow the rise during the baking of bread, cakes, etc. The excellent job that gluten has accomplished for the baker has increased the use of gluten into the greater share of processed foods. Gluten is used in these foods as a result of the ability to bind, shape, fill and extend the product.

So, what is a foodie to do when something you love is suddenly yanked from your repertoire of not only eating, but possibly cooking?

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First, you grieve. Yes, it is only one type of food, but it is a major part of the American diet.

I had just invested in the *King Arthur Whole Grains Cookbook* to learn how to cook with whole wheat, rye and barley in order to amp the fiber in my family's diet. The more whole grain I ate, the more damage I was doing to my intestines. Ever tried eating out without eating wheat? It is a whole new lifestyle.

And, that new lifestyle is step two. You have to learn all you can about gluten, what foods and products you can find it in and how to survive without it. I had to learn to order my burger without the bun, give up pasta at San Remo's for the grilled vegetables and order only items made with corn tortillas at Los Mochis.

You have to find Chinese food made without soy sauce (most contain wheat) or bring your own bottle of gluten-free soy for the chef. And so long to subs and other sandwiches.

Eating out can be a challenge. Some with celiac disease are so sensitive that they can't risk eating out at all because their food might be contaminated by coming in contact with gluten on a grill or in a fryer. Others cannot eat oats because they are easily cross-contaminated with wheat, rye and barley in the field and in processing plants.

You begin to read labels and discover that gluten is hiding in places you wouldn't imagine. The only cereal in a regular grocery store that I can eat and be totally confident that it is gluten-free is Rice Chex because they are certified by the Celiac Foundation and proudly say so on the box.

Corn Chex are out, however, because they are made with barley malt as a flavoring. Jelly Bellies are good, but most licorice and gummies are out because they are made with wheat. Chocolate candy bars can contain gluten. All processed food labels have to be checked because they can contain gluten in some form.

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I am also learning to cook without gluten. My cupboard still has wheat flour for the cookies and treats I bake for others (without tasting as much as possible), but now it is filled with potato flour, brown and white rice flours, oat flour, flax seed, sorghum flour, millet flour, xanthan gum, tapioca flour and cornstarch.

All of these in various combinations work together to mimic the properties that gluten brings to baked goods. Some of the flours are the protein binder. Some add the chewiness. Others add the crisp outer layer. It usually takes a combination of at least three flours to get these effects. It takes practice to bake gluten-free and time to search out new products, but there are lots of new products coming out each day.

Finally, I am beginning to realize that just because my food has to be gluten-free, it doesn't have to be taste- or pleasure-free. In fact, I kind of have a new found freedom. Because I eat less carbohydrates from bread and less fat from items fried in breading, I can pretty much enjoy the things I do eat guilt free, including French fries and sweets. I am determined to try new tastes and food experiences.

You or a family-member have just been diagnosed as needing a gluten-free diet. Where do you begin?

First, start with some specialty items made just for you that can be found at Whole Foods, Sprouts and even our local health food store. They have pretzels, crackers, cookies, bread, flours, pasta and all sorts of items made with gluten-free flours. You can even pick up gluten-free mixes for cornbread, pancakes and brownies. These will give you an idea of what type of flours you prefer. I have discovered that I don't like the strong taste of garbanzo bean flour used in some of the gluten-free mixes, whereas, my sister can't even taste it.

Second, read, read and read. There are tons of websites about gluten-free living and products. There are excellent books and cookbooks. A book I found helpful and informative was *Celiac Disease, A Hidden Epidemic*, by Peter Green, M.D. and Rory Jones.

My two favorite cookbooks at the moment are *Gluten-Free Baking Classics* by Annalise G. Roberts and 1,000

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Gluten-Free Recipes

by Carol Fenster. They are filled with wonderful recipes for baked goods that meet that need for chewy, crunchy, and crumbly.

The book I recommend first to people diagnosed with Celiac, especially women, is *Gluten-Free Girl*, by Shauna James Ahern. The book is based on Ahern's blog, glutenfreegirl.com, and it tells about the journey she has gone through since her diagnosis with Celiac disease.

You read about her life before and after her diagnosis. She shares her feelings of joy at being free of pain, sadness at losing wheat in all of its glory and frustration at being able to eat out confidently in a gluten world.

She also shares the hope of learning to eat a new way and helping to lead the charge as more and more Americans are diagnosed with Celiac every day.

It is estimated that one in every 133 people have Celiac Disease in some form. I have two friends at school who have also just been diagnosed this year. Tests for Celiac range from blood tests to a colonoscopy. Be sure your doctor is up to date on all of the new and rapidly changing information about gluten-sensitivity.

Have you or a family member been diagnosed with gluten-sensitivity or allergies? Would you be interested in starting a support group or know of one that already exists in Sulphur Springs? Drop me a line at: ccwelch60@yahoo.com.

Someday our community may have gluten-free menus at its restaurants or even a completely gluten-free restaurant like Laura's Bistro in Plano.

Until then, it will take a discerning eye and some creative thinking to eat well in a gluten-filled world. But since I'm looking forward to being a healthy, energized, pain-free "foodie," I think it will be worth it.

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For the past 20 years, Cindy Welch has been involved with all aspects of cooking, including formal culinary training, experience as food service director for First Baptist Church of Euless, a personal chef and owner of Cindy's Casa Cuisine. Cindy's favorite hobby is "providing delicious food for the people of Sulphur Springs." Her columns cover all aspects of the cooking experience.