



GLUTEN-FREE FOODS: FAD OR FABULOUS?

BY SARAH MAURER

The booming gluten-free food industry is on the rise, raking in some \$2.6 billion in profits each year. Proponents of the gluten-free diet claim it helps relieve a wide range of symptoms, from allergies to stomach upsets to temper tantrums in children. But is going gluten-free a healthy choice or simply another fad being marketed for profit?

Gluten is a natural protein compound found in wheat, barley and rye. Its natural elasticity lends

pizza dough, bagels and other baked products their characteristic chewiness. Gluten-derivatives are also used to add texture to processed foods like ketchup and ice cream.

While gluten is generally safe to eat, it can be harmful to people with certain medical conditions. About 1 in 133 Americans suffers from celiac disease, an extreme form of gluten sensitivity that causes chronic inflammation of the digestive tract. In addition, people with wheat allergy may experience a life-threatening reaction to certain forms of gluten. Both conditions require a lifelong restrictive diet to control symptoms and prevent

complications.

In recent years, some alternative medicine practitioners have begun touting the health benefits of a gluten-free lifestyle to the general public. They argue that the human digestive system is better evolved to handle a hunter-gatherer's diet of fresh meat and wild plants than cultivated crops like wheat. Some also argue that genetic engineering has increased the amount of protein in our grain supply. This has in turn increased the number of health problems experienced by gluten-sensitive individuals, including digestive disorders, headaches, allergies, mood disorders and neurological symptoms like dizziness.

There is preliminary scientific evidence that a gluten-free approach may indeed improve health, at least for some people. Results of a 2011 study at the University of Maryland suggest that about 6 percent of our population experiences a type of primitive immune response to gluten. While this form of gluten intolerance is less severe than celiac disease, it may still be strong enough to cause symptoms; however, researchers caution against drawing broad conclusions from the data and emphasize that the study has yet to be replicated.

Fad diet books aside, a gluten-free diet is a major lifestyle change that poses certain health risks. "Most people get their B vitamins and fiber from gluten," says Kimberly Wilkerson, RD, a dietitian at McKee Medical Center in Loveland. "All Americans are encouraged right now to get more fiber in their diets, and it's very difficult to do that if you don't have wheat and whole grains."

Wilkerson adds that contrary to popular belief, the gluten-free diet doesn't in itself promote weight loss. "It can be healthier in that you have to rely a lot more on fresh, whole foods," she says. "But if you're buying gluten-free baked products like brownies, breads or cookies, those are actually higher in calories than their counterparts made with wheat."

Daniel Langer, M.D., Centers for Gastroenterology in Loveland, counsels patients against using the diet to self-medicate, particularly if they have symptoms consistent with celiac disease. Left untreated, this illness can increase the risk of malnutrition, osteoporosis, cancer and autoimmune disease. Celiac symptoms can be quite subtle and often go undiagnosed. "That's one of my reasonings with potential celiac patients – let's confirm what this diagnosis is so we know how dedicated you need to be to a gluten-free diet," Dr. Langer says.

Dr. Langer adds that following a gluten-free diet can eliminate some of the chemical markers of celiac disease, making it more difficult to diagnose later. Patients who experience significant improvement in their symptoms while on a gluten-free diet should always be tested for the illness; however, this often involves reintroducing gluten for a certain period in order to obtain accurate test results.

A truly gluten-free diet is very difficult to follow and requires considerable know-how. "Oftentimes it takes talking with a nutritionist to really analyze your diet in detail and to find those potential foods that could have some gluten contamination," Dr. Langer says.

To begin with, patients must eliminate wheat, rye, barley and their many derivatives found in

canned and packaged foods. "It's almost to the point where it's better not to eat processed foods and stick with fresh fruits, vegetables and meats," says Wilkerson. Quinoa, rice, corn and pasta and flour products labeled "gluten-free" are also generally safe.

Gluten-free dieters must be vigilant about reading nutrition labels. Wilkerson provides patients with a list of over a hundred gluten-derived ingredients, including maltodextrin, modified food starch, caramel coloring, hydrolyzed vegetable protein and natural flavoring. In the future, she believes the FDA will require mandatory labeling of gluten-free foods. For now, manufacturers must clearly label foods or ingredients that contain wheat.

Contamination is another common issue for gluten-free dieters. Oatmeal, for example, is often processed alongside wheat and therefore contains trace amounts of gluten. "Just a few milligrams can contaminate a batch of food," Wilkerson says. "If an elephant had celiac and got a dose of gluten the size of the period at the end of this sentence, that would be enough to cause symptoms."

For people with diagnosed celiac disease, following a gluten-free diet typically relieves constipation, diarrhea, bloating and other symptoms within four to six weeks. More importantly, patients experience regeneration of their villi – the tiny, fingerlike projections that line the small intestine and aid in absorption of nutrients. Over time, this results in a return of energy and vitality, eliminates nutritional deficiencies and decreases the risk of illnesses such as osteoporosis and cancer.

It's still uncertain how much relief people with other forms of gluten intolerance can expect on the diet, but anecdotal evidence suggests that symptoms should improve within a few weeks. And in time, gluten intolerant individuals who have ruled out celiac disease may be able to enjoy the occasional gluten-rich beer or bagel without causing themselves discomfort. ☒

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Gluten-Free Green Chile Mac 'n' Cheese

Serves 4 to 6

BY ZAC WORMAN
Chef at Bent Fork the Grill

- 1 pound Elk Sausage
- ½ pound Gluten Free Macaroni
- 2 large Poblano Peppers
- ¼ Red Bell Pepper
- ¼ Red Onion
- 1 tsp. Chopped Garlic
- 1 Corn Stalk (Yellow or White)
- ¼ cup grated Pepper Jack Cheese
- 1 cup Heavy Whipping Cream
- 1 Tbsp. Olive Oil
- Salt and Pepper to Taste

There is a fair amount of prep work to be done before assembling the dish, about one hour, but the end results are well worth it. Start by roasting the sausage in the oven at 350 degrees for 30 to 40 minutes, or until the internal temperature reaches 165 degrees. After cooked, cool sausage completely and slice in quarter inch rounds. While the sausage is cooking, roast the poblano peppers in a grill pan or char-broiler. Place the poblanos directly above the flame and evenly char the outside. Once charred, place in a bowl and cover with plastic wrap – this will allow the steam from the peppers to release the charred skin making them much easier to peel.

When the peppers are room temperature peel and de-seed. Reserve for later.

While the peppers are cooling, cook the pasta. In a medium saucepan, bring two quarts of water to a boil, add pasta, stir immediately and reduce heat to medium. The pasta should take 6-10 minutes, depending on which variety of gluten free pasta you choose. Rice based pasta takes a little longer than quinoa based pasta. Strain pasta and run cold water on it until it is completely cooled.

Now for the knife work. Dice the red bell pepper, red onion and ½ of one of the two roasted poblano peppers into ¼ inch pieces. Shuck the corn and cut the kernels from the stalk. Take the remaining 1½ poblanos and puree in a food processor to make a green paste.

To build the pasta, take a large sauté or non-stick skillet (18- to 24-inch) and heat oil until right before it starts to smoke. Add sausage until it starts to brown, add the corn next, then the red onion, red pepper and garlic. Cook for another 30-45 seconds. Once all ingredients start to caramelize, add poblano puree and heavy whipping cream. These become the base for the sauce. Reduce the cream by half; at this point add the pasta to the skillet. Fold the pasta and the remaining diced poblanos into the sauce. Garnish with pepper jack cheese and you're ready to serve. Enjoy!

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...even the ones that didn't make the magazine!