

GLUTEN NOT-SO-FREE

The restrictive, captive side of a gluten-free life

We all watch our diets from time to time. We are careful not to over indulge while limiting our intake of carbohydrates per serving, per meal, per day. However, those who discover an allergy to gluten, a wheat protein, must take extra care in the type of carbohydrates that are consumed.

Wheat, barley, and rye contain the gluten protein which gives the breads, rolls, pastries, cakes and pastas their textures we all know and love. This protein is also used in a number of various products such as beer, cold cuts, hot dogs sausages, gravies, roux's, and cereals. Consuming these items could result in gluten sensitive individuals experiencing abdominal pain, diarrhea, bloating, gas, fatigue, iron deficiency, constipation and depression.

We were completely clueless in our journey in helping our daughter Michelle, then 11 years old, find answers to her intestinal misery. Michelle's discomforts didn't present themselves every day. While she would go for days to a week without discomfort, other times she would suffer daily in the morning. At that time we were unaware of the foods that were the catalyst of her significant pain. We brought our concerns and questions to her pediatrician who recommended that we make an appointment with a gastroenterologist. Within a week, viewing segments of two television shows discussing celiac disease and gluten sensitivity was an eureka moment! A host and author, Elisabeth Hasslebeck, and a guest on another television show were discussing their similar symptoms relating to gluten sensitivity. Wow, we weren't alone.

After speaking with her pediatrician, he confirmed that Michelle could either undergo an intestinal biopsy under sedation or simply limit her foods diligently through trial and error to see if her symptoms are eliminated. We immersed ourselves in medical professional sites and found gluten free cookbooks for guidance.

It has now been nearly 20 years living a gluten free life with Michelle. Initially, finding gluten free food items that were palatable was extremely difficult. Eating in restaurants was challenging, as very few had gluten free menus or gluten sensitive options. Servers and staff rarely seemed knowledgeable about what gluten-free truly meant. Our restaurant experiences involved requesting simply prepared items and meats with only salt, pepper and a small amount of butter; nearly all sauces and "seasoned salts" were omitted. We have found some dine in restaurants and fast food establishments to have dedicated fryers to prepare and cook battered items separately from French fries, ensuring fries free from contamination of wheat proteins. We have even located restaurants that offer a gluten-free crust for pizza! We were starting to see a light at the end of the restrictive tunnel of a gluten free world.

Michelle's early days were so painful that she has been more diligent than ever as she will willingly avoid most packaged foods unless she can clearly identify an item as certified gluten free from the packaging. She will also routinely consult family regarding the preparation of a dish, whether it's homemade or chef prepared in a restaurant.

As time has passed it has been wonderful to see that all food allergies are being recognized in a multitude of restaurants from formal dining to fast food and everywhere in between! However, buffets and potluck dinners still present challenges to dine safely.

The gluten free life has consisted of a significantly restrictive diet. However, the dietary needs of Michelle and so many others are finally being recognized and addressed, though it will be forever necessary for an individual to be their own advocate or to rely on someone knowledgeable of this lifestyle.

Submitted respectfully,

Ann Heier