

Monday, July 23 2007

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The right ingredients: New cookbook offers recipes for people with gluten intolerance
 By TYLER CHRISTENSEN of the Missoulian



Rachel Carlyle-Gauthier, the Gluten Free Mama, talks about her new cookbook "Gluten Free Mama's Best Baking Recipes" and gluten-free products. Carlyle-Gauthier started making gluten-free food after her youngest daughter, Lexie, was diagnosed with gluten intolerance. Photo by MARY HAYES/Missoulian

POLSON - Rachel Carlyle-Gauthier's youngest child was too sick for too long.

Lexie couldn't seem to stop vomiting, she had near-constant diarrhea and a bad rash - and it didn't seem to be getting better. But doctors couldn't find anything wrong with her; they assumed she had a bad case of colic and an overreactive mother.

"I was hysterical," Carlyle-Gauthier remembered. "I was a mess."

When Lexie was about 18 months old, one doctor noted that some of her symptoms matched the symptoms of celiac disease. Her mother seized on the possibility, and insisted that Lexie be tested.

Sure enough, the test revealed that Lexie is gluten-intolerant, meaning she can't digest a certain protein commonly found in most cereals and grains, including wheat. Celiac disease a fairly common genetic disorder, with some studies reporting that one in every 133 people in the United States has it. The only "cure" is a lifelong gluten-free diet.

Carlyle-Gauthier had herself tested for the disease as well, and her husband, too. Both, it turns out, are gluten-sensitive.

"My family pretty much went gluten-free from that point on," she said.

The challenge, she added, was coming up with gluten-free meals that tasted good. A lot of gluten-free products are bland and gritty because gluten acts as the binding agent that gives baked goods their texture, she explained.

So Carlyle-Gauthier experimented in the kitchen, taste-tested on her family, and then experimented some more. When people outside the family began raving about the results, she decided to compile some of her favorite recipes into a cookbook.

She got together with Billie McCrea, a Polson-born friend whose mother has celiac disease. McCrea, who has been cooking since the age of 10 and has a degree in home economics, contributed additional recipes and organized the whole collection.

The result, "Gluten Free Mama's Best Baking Recipes," includes more than 100 gluten-free recipes, from cinnamon rolls to hamburger buns. Each entry includes a list of ingredients, directions for baking and a scripture from the Bible.

It took the two about 14 months to finish the recipe book. Meanwhile, Carlyle-Gauthier prepared to launch her own gluten-free flour business.

She had been testing different blends of gluten-free flours to see which would produce the best results, and hit upon a particular combination that called for five different kinds. The mix includes rice and almond flours, and can be used just like all-purpose flour, substituted cup-for-cup in any recipe.

She started marketing the product a little more than a month ago, and now her gluten-free flour, sold under the "Gluten Free Mama" label, can be found at Super 1 Foods and Mission Mountain Foods in Polson, and the Good Food Store in Missoula. A distributor is also helping to get it on the shelves in eastern Montana.

"It's doing amazingly in Montana," she said.



The flour is also available to order on her Web site, and has already found customers as far away as New York. And last week, while visiting family in Seattle, Carlyle-Gauthier took the opportunity to line up clients in Washington.

Now, she's planning to increase production significantly. Her first run, she noted, gave her about 300 2-pound packages. So the next run will be for 1,200 packages.

Increasing awareness about celiac disease has led to more diagnoses and a rising demand for gluten-free products, said Bob Warren, sales manager at Gifts of Nature.

"The gluten-intolerant market's been growing significantly over the last five years," Warren said.

Warren's business has been selling gluten-free products and mixes exclusively since 1989, when it opened in its original location in the Bitterroot Valley. About four years ago, it changed ownership and relocated to St. Ignatius, which offered a manufacturing facility closer to home, Warren explained.

Then, it relocated again - to an even bigger facility in Polson that offers the option of expanding more in the future.

"We actually have two structures in Polson now, and one is more of a warehouse," Warren said.

Gifts of Nature counts 300 retail accounts across the country and burgeoning Internet sales. It continues to add to its product line with new mixes, including a cranberry-orange muffin mix introduced last fall that uses a relatively new, trademarked product called Montina, Warren explained.

Montina is made from wild rice grass, and is provided by Ronan-based Amazing Grains - which also specializes in gluten- and wheat-free products.

Soon, Gifts of Nature will expand its offering beyond gluten-free brown rice and bean flours, Warren said, to include gluten-free rolled-oat flour.

He met with Carlyle-Gauthier before she started her business to talk about the possibility of collaborating, but one of her main ingredients is almond flour and Warren prefers to maintain a nut-free facility to appeal to consumers with nut allergies.

So Carlyle-Gauthier is building her own manufacturing facility. She estimates she's sunk about \$10,000 into the roomy outbuilding in her backyard, including \$7,000 for a specialty mixing machine that will arrive Friday.

Adding in the cost of raw materials, packaging and other basic expenses, the mother of three young girls estimates she's at least \$25,000 into her business. She's bootstrapping the whole operation, and learning as she goes.

Fortunately, she has some small-business experience. She started a cake-decorating business straight out of high school, and has been running a preschool for the past 10 years or so.

Her husband, Travis Gauthier, runs his own upholstery business, and has been an invaluable source of advice and support, she said. She's also getting step-by-step advice - and a small loan - from the Montana Community Development Corp. in Missoula.

Carlyle-Gauthier's decision to develop a recipe book in combination with her baking product was a savvy approach that helps set her apart from others, said Steve Grover, MCDC's business development manager.

"She definitely has the skills and the ambition to follow through," Grover said.

Staff at MCDC continue to meet with Carlyle-Gauthier about once a week to review the progress of her business and plan out the next step. Meanwhile, she continues to experiment with new products.

In about six months, she plans to offer a pancake mix. Then a brownie mix.

"Our society is convenience-oriented," she noted. "People just want to add water and an egg. I'm planning on adding a new mix every three months until I have a whole line."

Both Carlyle-Gauthier and McCrea are also planning new cookbooks, but those won't likely be ready for at least another year. It takes a long time to develop a new recipe, McCrea said. You have to make it and test it repeatedly to make sure the results are consistent.

Fortunately, their family and friends make willing test subjects. And Carlyle-Gauthier doesn't have to worry about Lexie getting sick anymore.


"She is so healthy and thriving," her mother said. "She's a completely different kid."


Meet the authors


Meet Rachel Carlyle-Gauthier and Billie McCrea, co-authors of "Gluten Free Mama's Best Baking Recipes," Saturday at Barnes & Noble Booksellers in Missoula. The two will be signing copies of their gluten-free cookbook and handing out gluten-free treats from 2 to 4 p.m.

McCrea will provide banana-poppysseed bread, and Carlyle-Gauthier will make chocolate truffle brownies.

For more information about Carlyle-Gauthier's Polson-based business, Gluten Free Mama, visit her Web site at www.glutenfreemama.com. McCrea's Web site is www.goingglutenfree.com.

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