

December 14, 2005

## For Wheat Watchers, a Chance to Indulge

By CATHERINE SAINT LOUIS

DURING the holidays, a woman cannot live on poached pears alone - even if she is allergic to wheat.

It is not known precisely how many people have trouble with wheat because food allergies are often underdiagnosed. Three million Americans also are believed to have celiac disease, a hereditary intolerance to gluten, according to a 2003 study from the Center for Celiac Research in Baltimore.

Rebecca Reilly, the author of "Gluten-Free Baking" (Simon & Schuster, 2002), scours health food shops wherever she travels to find new products she can bring home to her gluten-intolerant children. "When you're told you can't have something, then it becomes the focus," said Ms. Reilly, a chef who teaches at Torte Knox, a cooking school in Hawley, Pa. "It's like the forbidden fruit."

A decade ago, bakers who wanted gluten- and wheat-free baked goods had to hunt down rice, potato and bean flours and concoct substitutes for wheat flour. Those efforts usually resulted in cakes and cookies that were either bland, brick-hard or crumbly (baked goods can fall apart without gluten, which is a protein in wheat that gives kneaded dough its elasticity).

Gluten-Free Pantry ([glutenfree.com](http://glutenfree.com)) and Pamela's Products ([pamelasproducts.com](http://pamelasproducts.com)) have been the standouts with the wheat-free crowd for years and are widely available. But now they have competition from hundreds of companies that make wheat- or gluten-free baked goods that are as moist and flavorful as the real thing.

I've tested many of them and found several that deserve to be singled out. Chip Rosenberg and his wife, Patsy, who has food allergies, started Cherrybrook Kitchen less than a year ago. Now the company sells mixes for chocolate cakes and sugar cookies nationwide at stores like Whole Foods and SuperTarget. Their light, crisp sugar cookies are perfect as holiday gifts or to dip in hot chocolate ([cherrybrookkitchen.com](http://cherrybrookkitchen.com)).

The chocolate chunk brownies from a mix from [www.123glutenfree.com](http://www.123glutenfree.com) are moist but not too gooey.

Those who prefer to bake from scratch can adapt conventional recipes to be made with alternative flours, like Heron Foods's versatile Organic Bread and Cake mix, which made delicious cakes that reliably rose and also browned well ([www.jollygrub.com/OnLineStore](http://www.jollygrub.com/OnLineStore)). And Bob's Red Mill's flour blend from garbanzo and fava beans makes delicious cakes, if a bit hearty ([www.bobsredmill.com](http://www.bobsredmill.com)).

But it helps to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the many flours now available.

A good place to start is Bette Hagman's book "The Gluten-Free Gourmet Makes Dessert" (Henry Holt and Co., 2002).

The book is like a decoder ring, clarifying why some cakes don't rise and others are too bland. Using xanthan gum, she explains, can keep gluten-free cakes from crumbling. Rice flour tends to be drier than bean flours, so it helps to add a little more fat. Tapioca flour can lessen the grittiness of rice flours. To overcome the fact that many gluten-free flours have less protein than wheat flour does, protein can be added in the form of eggs, milk, buttermilk or unflavored gelatin.

Learning to bake without wheat and gluten is a bit like learning another language. There is a steep curve at first, but once you understand how the elements combine, you no longer need to think through each step.