

Entering the Gluten-Free Arena

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More consumers are asking about it. More journalists are writing about it. More health practitioners are recommending it: gluten-free food.

The market for gluten-free products is big and getting bigger, totaling \$4.2 billion and reaching an estimated 21 million households in 2012. Over the next four years, the demand for gluten-free foods is expected to reach \$6.5 billion, according to researchers Packaged Facts.

Clearly the demand is there — but should your company create the supply? While manufacturing a gluten-free food may seem like a simple matter of reviewing ingredient lists, the reality is much more complex.

Gluten-free products contain no wheat, barley, rye, or in some cases, oats; they cater to a wide variety of customers and needs. For some, gluten-free foods simply carry a perceived health value. For others, even traces of wheat can trigger extreme, debilitating symptoms.

Although the FDA has not yet published federal guidelines for the labeling of gluten-free foods sold within the United States, manufacturers must still strive to ensure that their gluten-free products will not harm gluten intolerant consumers.

Creating safe gluten-free foods requires careful analysis of every step of the manufacturing process. This can be daunting, and many manufacturers seek the assistance of organizations like the [Gluten-Free Certification Organization](#) [1] and the [Celiac Sprue Association](#) [2]. Both offer gluten-free certification for facilities that adhere to certain standards and practices.

If you are considering a gluten-free product, there are several key areas to keep in mind. Here are some tips for entering the gluten-free arena:

Know Your Supply Chain: Ensuring that a final product is safe for people with celiac disease means going all the way back to the fields and farms that provide the most basic ingredients. If a gluten-free grain is grown in rotation with wheat, barley, rye or some strains of oat — or if it is harvested or milled with equipment that also processes these toxic grains — there is a high chance of contamination.

All ingredients must be traced to the source, not just grains. Meats, spices, dairy, etc. may all be contaminated. Understanding what precautions your suppliers take is the first step towards understanding what precautions you need to take.

Know Your Facility: It is absolutely possible to make safe gluten-free foods in a facility that also creates gluten-full products. However, a shared facility presents additional challenges. Shared equipment must thoroughly be sanitized before use; traces of gluten may remain in hard-to-reach areas, and may settle back onto surfaces after being airborne during a “regular” production run.

Additionally, employees working in a gluten-free area may inadvertently track gluten in with them as they move from one part of the facility to another. Develop protocol for minimizing or eliminating the risk of cross-contamination.

One simple tip: A gluten-free production run should be the day’s first. This gives any airborne gluten from the day before maximum time to settle on surfaces, from which it can be detected and cleaned.

Know What to Ask: Whether you’re talking with your suppliers or your employees, simply asking, “Is it gluten-free?” isn’t enough. Find out what specific methods are used to identify and prevent contamination, how often they are performed, and how often they are validated. The safest suppliers are those who are ready and willing to discuss their methods.

“We know it’s safe because we don’t put anything unsafe in it,” is a red flag; if there is no gluten quality control happening before the ingredient gets to you, you’ll want to be extra-careful to verify its safety before bringing it in contact with your clean equipment and safe ingredients.

Test, Test, Test: Detecting gluten in foods and on surfaces has never been more simple, accurate or cost-effective. On-site rapid tests like [GlutenTox Pro](#) [3] can identify contamination of any food, liquid or surface, and do not require special equipment or scientific know-how.

Ingredients should be tested when they arrive at your facility; if there is contamination, it’s better to find out before you’ve produced a finished, unsalable and unsafe product. Greater care should be taken for higher-risk ingredients, including testing samples from multiple areas of the shipment.

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Test surfaces prior to a gluten-free production run if there is a chance of contact with gluten. This includes everything from stationary machinery to counters to lightweight equipment like bowls and mixers.

Finished foods should also be tested, from various spots within the production run. Periodically, these final products should be sent to a third party lab for more vigorous ELISA testing. External labs can provide quantitative analysis and sharable documentation of the safety of your gluten-free products.

Bring Science on Your Side: As the gluten-free market grows, so does the body of scientific research regarding identifying safe and unsafe foods. Over the past few years, scientists have pinpointed the specific peptides within the gluten molecule that are most harmful to people with celiac disease: most notably, the 33mer peptide. Newer-generation antibodies like the G12 found in GlutenTox react to this specific peptide, linking positive test results to potentially toxic foods and giving you the best chance to identify and eliminate a problem. This is especially valuable for highly processed, hydrolyzed or fermented foods whose molecular structures will be quite different from those of the original ingredients.

Sharing is Caring: The gluten-free consumer is both brand-loyal and savvy. Educate your consumers on the steps you take to ensure their safety; the more you share, the safer they will feel bringing your gluten-free products into their gluten-free homes.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.gfco.org/>

[2] http://www.csaceliacs.info/csa_recognition_seal.jsp

[3] <http://glutentoxpro.com/>