

Gluten-free market now worth millions in Canada

BY CHRIS ZDEB, OTTAWA CITIZEN MAY 1, 2013



Owner Jerry Bigam at the donut line at Kinnickinnick Foods in Edmonton.

Photograph by: John Lucas, John Lucas/Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON — Shortly after she was diagnosed with celiac disease, Maria Vicente and her mom popped into a downtown restaurant for lunch.

“Is there anything on the menu that’s gluten-free?” Vicente asked the hostess, who handed her a menu.

There was nothing marked gluten-free and when Vicente pointed out there was no information about what any of the dishes contained, the hostess took back the menu and told her, “We don’t cater to your trend here.”

Six years later, gluten-free is the “it” diet of the day, and not just because of celiacs like Vicente, who have a medical reason to be on it.

Gluten is a complex protein found in grains such as wheat, rye and barley that in people with celiac disease triggers an autoimmune reaction that damages the lining of the small intestine. This can

interfere with the absorption of nutrients from food, causing malnutrition and other symptoms, leading to problems such as osteoporosis, infertility, nerve damage and seizures. There is no cure but the disease can be controlled by diet.

The majority of people eating gluten-free, however, don't have medical conditions. They just choose the diet because it's trendy or they believe it's a healthier alternative, and the marketplace is responding to that choice.

"They've heard it will help them lose weight or make them feel better, although there is no scientific evidence that it will," says Dr. Alessio Fasano, a Boston-based celiac and gluten sensitivity researcher.

Many restaurants now offer gluten-free items on their menus. The Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association can't put a dollar figure on gluten free sales, but its annual survey of Canadian chefs listed "gluten-free/food allergy conscious" at No. 2 on its Top 10 menu trends for 2013, up from No. 6 in 2011. (Locally produced and locally inspired dishes topped the list for the third year in a row.)

Gluten free products that were once found only in health food stores now sit on shelves in mainstream grocery stores. Superstore has a dedicated section.

Kinnikinnick Foods, which started in Edmonton with six employees in 1998, is now a leading gluten-free baked goods manufacturer that employs 70 people.

It has been joined recently by smaller operations such as the Edmonton Gluten Free Mart on 97th Street and the RioVida Gluten Free Bakery in the west end. Such shops are usually run by people with a gluten-related disorder themselves or those who have someone in their family who does.

According to an article last year in BMC Medicine, a peer-reviewed online medical journal, the market for gluten-free food and beverage products in the United States has been growing quickly over the past decade.

Retail sales totalled about \$1.6 billion in North America in 2010 and about \$2.5 billion worldwide. They were expected to reach about \$2.6 billion in 2012, but soared to around \$5.3 billion.

"The way I see it," Fasano say, "the pendulum went from almost a negligible amount of gluten free sales, which meant a negligible amount of people on a gluten-free diet 10 years ago, to a huge amount now.

"I believe the pendulum is still swinging upward, but eventually, at some point, it will come back down and stabilize.

"When the fashionable embracement of the diet will be gone, we'll be left mainly with consumers with gluten related disorders."

Postmedia News

© Copyright (c) The Ottawa Citizen

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)



Owner Jerry Bigam at the donut line at Kinnickinnick Foods in Edmonton.

Photograph by: John Lucas, John Lucas/Edmonton Journal

