

essential
Health

Words Rachel Oakes-Ash

Dough limit

Coeliacs must learn to live without their daily bread.

I must confess: for the past 30-odd years I have been having an affair with bread. Thick crusty ryes, warm baguettes, ciabatta dripping in olive oil, croissants, brioche, cheeky pain au raisin, I desire them all.

There is a major obstacle to my affair: what I love doesn't love me back. I can feel it in my gut. My body can't tolerate gluten.

Until recently gluten, the major protein found in wheat, rye, barley and triticale, tore my gut apart as it attacked the lining of my small intestine, creating holes and "leaky gut syndrome". This allowed all sorts of nasty toxins to enter my bloodstream, or so I was told by a concerned nutritionist who spotted my torrid affair with bread.

I was sceptical at first. Gluten, after all, is the "new fat", replacing the sugar substitutes of the '80s, the fat enemy of the '90s and the fear of carbohydrates in the new century.

Certainly the gluten-free industry





is thriving. Virgin Blue lists gluten-free products on in-flight menus and Crowne Plaza hotels note gluten-free items on their room-service menus.

Treble Cone ski field in New Zealand lists gluten-free foods on its menus, CSR has a range of gluten-free icing sugar mixes and even Sunbeam's Quantum Smartbake bread maker has a gluten-free setting.

So when Muffin Break starts producing gluten-free muffins in 65 varieties alongside its low-fat, high-fibre and low-GI choices, it is hard to write the movement off as just another food fad.

Gluten allergy is an honest affliction with its own medical condition, coeliac disease. Coeliacs have an abnormal reaction to gluten and are unable to process nutrients required for

a healthy body because the cells on the lining of the intestine are damaged and inflamed.

The Coeliac Society of Australia (www.coeliac.org.au) says 1 per cent of Australians are afflicted – 10 times as many as was estimated 10 years ago. Symptoms include diarrhoea, constipation, excessive flatulence, weight fluctuations, skin conditions, anaemia, bone and joint pain, miscarriages and irritability.

The Mayo Clinic in the United States has even found a direct link between gluten intolerance and cognitive decline, with the reversal of dementia-like symptoms when the patients stopped eating gluten.

Diagnosis is done with a blood test, stool test or an elimination diet. The only cure is a life without gluten. Many people are unaware they have a gluten problem and may go years without diagnosis. The condition

may not appear until adulthood and symptoms are often attributed to other conditions, including irritable bowel syndrome, before gluten intolerance is even considered.

Dr Libby Ellis, a nutritionist at the Gold Coast's Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat, describes the "mind-numbing" qualities of gluten as "brain fog" and believes binge eating and gluten are linked.

"Many people describe 'disappearing' when bingeing on large quantities of gluten-containing food," she says. "Fragments of gluten have the potential to bind to opioid receptors in the brain and alter neural pathways important for communication and concentration.

"It's the same area of thought that has exposed a possible link between gluten and autism in children. The theory being: take the child with autism off glu-



BODY BUILDERS

Sandbags are the new fitness accessory.
Page 13



ALL IN THE FAMILY

Mental illness could be in your genes.
Page 14

I dropped the bread and dropped six kilos, lost my lethargy and stopped napping at 3pm every day.

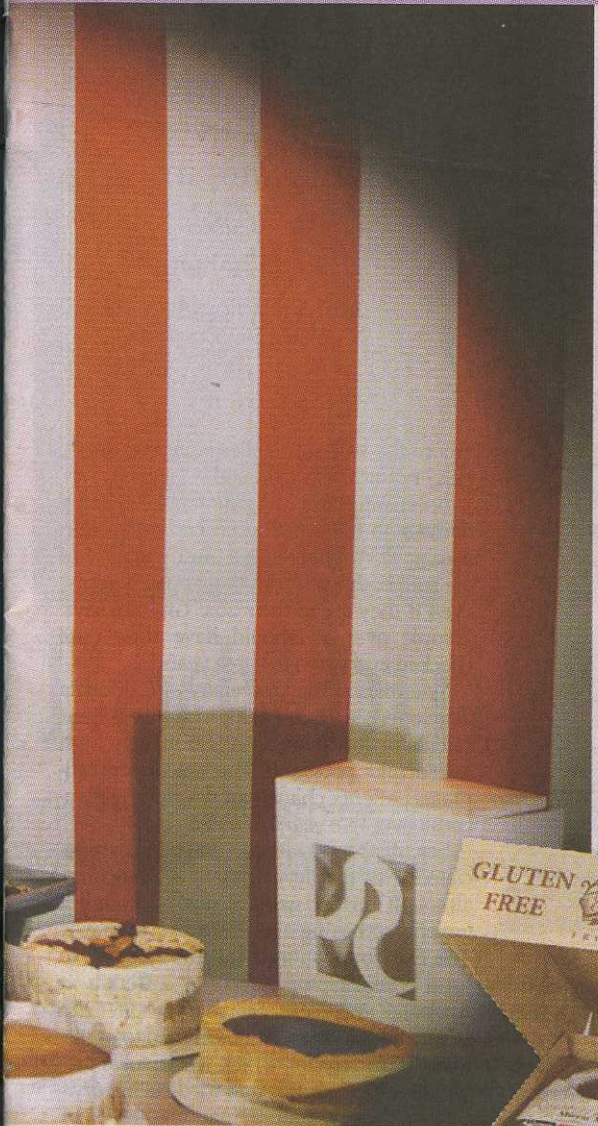
"I lost eight kilos in 10 weeks," she says. "I had been carrying a lot of fluid as an allergic reaction. I gained lots of energy and my symptoms just disappeared. There were not many gluten-free products or resources when I went off gluten. I would read labels constantly but there was hidden gluten in so many ingredients."

Food Standards of Australia and New Zealand (www.foodstandards.gov.au) has recently forced manufacturers to list any product containing gluten. If a starch is derived from wheat, the packaging must state this, making gluten detection easier.

Gluten-free products on the market have been driven both by those who suffer from coeliac disease and those who now see it as a growing market segment. Rowie Dillon, 39, started Rowie's Cakes (www.rowiescakes.com.au) in 2002 after being diagnosed as coeliac. She now produces more than 5000 cakes from her commercial kitchen in Marrickville each week. The company's raspberry layer cake and chocolate soy ganache are stocked nationally at David Jones and Macro Wholefoods.

"Gluten-free is a category not a strategy," she says. "Unlike fat-free or low-GI, gluten-free and wheat-free baking is about using a method to ensure good taste, not simply about using gluten-free flour or loading up on almond meal."

Since Rowie's launched, other gourmet



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This is not a suggestion to take all children off gluten, as foods containing the protein are a good source of energy, B-group vitamins and fibre. But if your child is displaying coeliac symptoms or behavioural problems, gluten could be the cause.

Deborah Manners, 52, is the founder of the Food Intolerance consumer information website (www.foodintol.com) and has eschewed gluten since 1994. For 20 years she had been consistently borderline anaemic, suffering from gastro-intestinal symptoms, headache, a lack of energy and an inability to process iron. After an elimination diet, she discovered she was gluten intolerant.



Rowie Dillon (top) and her allergy-free creations (right), and muffins from Gourmet Treats from Heaven (above). Photos: Quentin Jones, Michel O'Sullivan

gluten-free products have entered the market. Each week, the Byron Bay Cookie Company produces 50,000 gluten-free biscuits that are sold in 2000 outlets nationally. The range has been the fastest-growing for the company, representing 73 per cent of its entire single-wrap biscuit sales.

Similarly, Lara and Richard Lakin started Gourmet Treats from Heaven (www.glutenfreecakes.com.au) in November last year and have quadrupled sales in the first year. They and their two children avoid gluten.

“I made gluten-free cakes for my kids at birthday parties,” Lara says. “I’d offer them to everyone so my kids didn’t feel different and everyone kept saying how good they were.”

A business plan was created, a manufacturer found and Gourmet Treats from Heaven now sells muffins,

chocolate brownies and carrot cake at Gloria Jean’s, Michel’s Patisserie and David Jones nationally.

Add *The Eat Well Cookbook; dairy free and gluten free recipes for food lovers*, written by Jan Purser and Kathy Snowball, and the Gluten Free Travel Company (www.glutenfreetravel.com.au, due to start operating in January) and it is obvious gluten-free living has become mainstream.

As for me, I dropped the bread and dropped six kilos, lost my lethargy and stopped napping at 3pm every day. After a minor slip-up when I returned to my old lover, bread, my earlier symptoms returned for more than a month. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to realise gluten was my health downfall and it has again been banished from my life. And as with most broken relationships, it’s gut-wrenching – pun intended.