



## Gluten Free Food

**GLUTEN FREE**

### it doesn't have to taste awful

These are the days of allergies, at least it seems so. People can fall ill simply by coming into contact with a substance that their bodies and immune systems can't handle. Even the bare trace of a peanut may trigger anaphylactic shock resulting in death. Those at risk can take precautions to avoid the substances likely to do them harm, which is fine if they aren't particularly averse to the safe substitute, but when it boils down to food and what they can no longer have, many are disappointed, even bitter when told they have to miss out on those tasty morsels that they used to enjoy. Anyone suffering from coeliac disease will know what I'm talking about. This, for the uninformed and those lucky puppies who don't have the problem, is a condition which affects the small bowel and can result in a mild to severe reaction to gluten, an ingredient found in some cereal crops, particularly wheat. It can mean no decent bread or cakes, no melt-in-the-mouth pastry, practically no nothing! Actually, that's not quite true: gluten isn't present in all foodstuffs, but it surprised me when I looked more closely at the packaging in supermarkets to discover that very few products were gluten free. So, when our grand-daughter who is gluten-intolerant came to stay with us, I had to change my approach to cooking.

I have heard of families where one or more members, but not all, have this kind of allergy; the way they adjust to it, however, was one I preferred not to adopt. I couldn't see the sense in having to cook two separate meals in the same session. So, my wife and I agreed to eat the same food that I was having to prepare for Alyssa. Believe it or not, with many of the dishes we couldn't taste any difference; and, although it could have been pure coincidence, after seven weeks on a gluten-free diet we both felt healthier, suffered less from indigestion and the doctor said that my return to normal blood pressure was a cause for celebration!

Enough of the waffle - let's get down to the nitty gritty. Gluten-free products are available in most supermarkets, often in the health-food section, while some stores even have a set of shelves devoted exclusively to them. My main GF cooking ingredients comprise plain and self-raising flour, baking powder, gravy mix and stock powder. I gather that most vegetables and fruit are gluten-free, and research suggests that animal products such as meat and eggs are too, despite the fact that the creatures which provide them are often fed cereal crops. This means that a good percentage of dishes that everyone else eats can be prepared with ingredients that contain no gluten. Gluten-free plain flour as a thickener for casseroles, sauces and stews works the same as wheat flour, and if there is a difference in taste, we haven't noticed it. A white roux as might be used for brandy or cheese sauces can be made in the old way, but with gluten-free plain flour taking the place of the wheat version. Sauces for meat dishes turn out well using GF gravy powder, perhaps adding a bit of stock powder or spice for extra taste; and the addition of a little sherry or wine makes a pleasant change. When it comes to bread and pastry, however, the transition isn't quite as appealing.

We've tried some ready-prepared pastry and bread mixes to discover they are indeed quite unpleasant as our grand-daughter claimed. I daresay anyone brought up on them wouldn't complain, but after sixty-odd years of enjoying wheat, our taste-buds demanded something at least approaching palatable. In all of them there was a strange, oily flavour akin to linseed which we don't like, so we made a closer inspection of the ingredients on the packets to see what went into them. The base ingredients were mainly tapioca, rice, soya and potato flours, plus starches

of the same kind. Inclusions would seem to vary, depending on the country: in the UK, for example, some blends contain buckwheat, something of a misnomer because it isn't actually wheat at all; plus other ingredients like carob and sugar beet fibre for brown bread. How these affect the taste, I have no idea. Of those that I was able to check, there was no linseed, but various gums had been added, xanthan and guar to name just two, then a substance called carboxymethylcellulose which sounded a bit like wallpaper paste! No wonder they tasted funny. I decided to go back to basics, adapting my old recipes by substituting a GF plain flour which claimed to have no peculiar additives, and a self-raising that slipped in only one - I'm still a bit dubious about this.

I've always been able to make a pretty good shortcrust and we love pies, so I thought I'd give one a go. The result was both a nightmare and a disaster! Right from the start I knew it would be: while rubbing in the fat, the texture felt strange, fine certainly, but not what I was used to. After the water was added, the dough was heavy and sticky. My next mistake was using rice flour to dust the board when I rolled it out. Finally, I had my pie topping and tried to pick it up in the usual way by curling it around the rolling pin. It cracked, bits broke off, and by the time it was on the dish it looked like it had been used as a target on a rifle range! That wasn't the end of it - baked as per normal, it didn't appear too bad out of the oven, but it was as tough as shoe leather and didn't taste much better. For my next attempt I added a little self-raising to the plain flour. I've proved this works with wheat flour, so I thought: why not? I'd rubbed in the fat and then had another idea, a really stupid one. I borrowed a tablespoon of cold mashed potato and worked it in, thinking this might add some elasticity. It did, and the transfer to the dish was incident free. Once in the oven it looked great, a real pie; unfortunately the crust didn't want to brown, so I left it in a while longer, too long as it happened. This time, the edge was a tooth-breaker and the rest as chewy as a piece cut from a wet-suit! For mark III, I left out the mash, but added some bicarbonate of soda. This one fell off the fork like crumble pastry and was so salty as to be almost inedible.

Convinced there had to be a way, I asked around and was disappointed by the general consensus of opinion which declared that nobody could make a half-decent GF pastry. Okay, said my wife, let's Google it. There were plenty of recipes and suggestions, but a picture of the most suitable didn't look any better than my failed attempts. One good thing did come out of it, though - many of the recipes used an egg or two in the mix. I'd always put a yolk in my sweet and cheese shortcrusts, so I figured it might work. Woo-hoo, it did! And here's the recipe. Before you dash into the kitchen, I should add a word of advice: care needs taking with mixing and rolling, so any cook in a rush won't achieve a 100% success.

**For a pie with base and top in a 15cm (6 inch) square dish OR  
top-only on a larger pie dish**

125g GF plain flour  
25g GF self-raising flour  
35g vegetable margarine  
1/4 tsp salt (optional)  
1 egg yolk  
1 tsp extra virgin olive oil  
milk  
egg-white or milk to glaze

Mix the flours and salt in a bowl, then rub in the fat until the mixture resembles fine breadcrumbs. Beat the oil and egg yolk together lightly, then stir into the dry ingredients with a fork, taking up as much of the flour as possible before adding any milk. Put this in a little at a time, folding to the point where the dough starts to bind. Test with the fingers - if it feels dry and gritty, add a touch more milk until the dough is just moist enough to form into a single lumpy ball. Don't knead it! - the less it is handled, the lighter it will be. If making a small pie with base, divide into two balls, one slightly larger to allow for the edge to come up the sides of the dish. Now, leave the dough in the bowl, cover with cling wrap and place in the fridge for five minutes to cool.

The next, perhaps most important step, is the rolling which needs to be slow and careful. For the base and topping pastry (we'll concentrate on this version: the other will just be a single roll-out), cut three sheets of baking paper big enough to line the dish with some spare. This kind of pastry doesn't like deep, steep-sided dishes because it can crack very easily. Shallow dishes with sloping sides are better. **Don't use dusting flour - it will dry out the dough!** Just place the larger dough ball in the centre of a paper sheet and press down with the palm of the hand. It will crack around the edges, but you will remedy this shortly. Roll lightly to increase the surface area a bit, then pat in the edges - with your hand if using a round dish, with the rolling pin if it is a square or rectangular one. Roll out a bit more, then carefully turn it over and pat the outside to retain the desired shape and remove the cracks. Repeat this to the point where the pastry seems too thin to turn, leave it as is and just carry on rolling. Because you are using no dusting powder, the dough will try to stick to the rolling pin. Wipe this occasionally with a hand; and if the edge of the pastry starts to pick up, be a little less heavy-handed and take it slower. The base will obviously need to come up the sides of the dish, so allow for this in the rolling. Once it is the right size, cover with a second piece of baking paper to prevent drying, then put it to one side while you roll out the top using the same method. When this is done, slide it (still on the paper) onto a stiff cutting sheet or a suitable plate and rest in the fridge for ten minutes. Leave the base out - it will stay softer making it more pliable when it goes into the dish.

It's time to get the oven going and put any finishing touches to the filling. Once they are taken care of, you can sit back and enjoy your favourite beverage because you're almost done. When the ten minutes are up, bring out the pastry. Remove the paper covering the base (save this to go on the top crust), pick it up using the baking paper it has been rolled on, position over the dish and gently tease it down, paper and all (this will line the dish), gently pressing together any splits. Now pour in the filling.

The final stage needs extra care, because you are going to have to turn the top over. Remove this from the fridge, brush the edge with water and do the same with the pastry in the dish. Leave the top stuck to the paper it was rolled on and cover with the saved paper. Now you have to transfer it to the pie. For a small dish like the one I used, my hand was enough support, but if you are making the larger pie topping you may have to use a thin plastic cutting sheet or similar. Don't remove either sheet of baking paper yet. Place one hand, or slide a thin cutting sheet, under the baking paper, and the other hand, or the second plastic sheet, over the top, then turn over. Move this to the correct position over the dish (close enough isn't good enough - if the pastry falls in, you'll never get it out in one piece!). Take off the top plastic sheet so that you can see what's going on through the baking paper, then slide out the supporting hand or the other sheet - don't remove the paper underneath the crust until it is in the right position. Once the final adjustments have been made, then you can slide it. Finally, peel off the baking paper it has been rolled on, taking care to avoid splitting. Now, crimp down the edge of the pie and make a few holes in the top to release any steam.

Brush with egg white or milk and bake on 190°C (175°C fan-forced) for 25 minutes, or until golden. When cooked, the pie with the base can be lifted from the dish using the paper, transferred to a board for cutting, then slid onto the serving plates with a spatula or fish-slice. My pie was great and tasted the same as it had always been with wheat flour. I sincerely hope yours turns out the same. Just a word of warning: temperatures and cooking times will need adjusting to allow for the idiosyncrasies of your particular oven, not to mention where you place the pie on the shelf. Hopefully by now, you'll know what to expect from your cooker.

As well as pastry, we are also fond of batter puddings, in particular Yorkshires and Toad in the Hole. My old recipe worked better using 2 - 2½ tablespoons of GF plain flour and **TWO** eggs plus the milk, of course, mixed and rested in the usual way (see Recipe 13). With my first attempt, I used a temperature of 170°C fan-forced which produced puddings that looked great in the oven, but they sank miserably when I put them on the plates. If you don't mind softer Yorkshires, try them this way, because they cook quicker and still taste great; but if you prefer them crisper and "upstanding" lower the oven setting to 160°C fan-forced and leave them in a bit

longer (about 30-40 minutes). This recipe made 3 huge puddings, or would probably be enough for 10-12 patty-size. I also discovered that the same mixture makes excellent pancakes, especially with the addition of a little sugar and cinnamon.

As for cakes, there are GF mixes available, but I haven't tried them myself so can't recommend any. I would imagine, however, that they could be made with the standard GF flours, plus the addition of an extra egg. I'll have to try this and see what happens. I can, however, recommend this month's recipe as one that most of you will enjoy. **Hoolie Doolies** not only taste good, but they are a breeze to make - 35 minutes to prepare and cook, all up. The exclamation of the same name came from our Grandson when he first tried them, and I suspect you'll be hollering the words too. These little cakes are so adaptable that anyone can make them, even the kids, because there's no rubbing in, just a good old stir with a wooden spoon. They can be sweet or savoury using a variety of additions to the basic mix to suit most tastes. Less milk results in a drier consistency producing something resembling rock buns that can be cooked longer for a crunchy texture; more milk in the mixture is the opposite. It is really worth experimenting to make your own special Hoolie Doolies.

Many of our recipes can be adapted to use gluten-free flours and products. If you haven't done so already, why not give one or more a go. It is simply a matter of substituting a few ingredients. The only ones I might have trouble with at the moment would be Pizza, Roast Turkey Carvery and Focaccia - mainly because they are bread-based. I'll have to try Strawberry Shortcake myself, but I see no reason why it couldn't be made using GF plain flour (without the gum) and GF baking powder. Have a play yourself, invent your own recipes – whatever happens, you won't need to starve... well, hopefully not.

Aside from giving a promise to carry on experimenting with GF recipes, there's little more I can tell you. What I will say, though, is don't be satisfied with second best. You deserve to eat well and there's no reason you shouldn't. Scour the shops and supermarkets for GF products, give them a go; and if they make the food taste ghastly, lob it out for the birds and try again. Eventually you'll be able to achieve what we have - seven weeks without repeating a single meal, and all as good as the ones we used to eat; except for the trial versions of the pastry, of course, but even that experience was good for a laugh. So, please enjoy your gluten-free life in the knowledge that you are as healthy, if not more so, than your average wheat-eaters.

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