

# Gluten Free's Growing Niche

By: Kayln Pearson

**W**heat has been considered the staff of life, but what do people do when wheat is not an option in their diets?

Sorghum's gluten-free properties can control symptoms for people who battle celiac sprue disease, which causes an allergy to wheat gluten. About three million people in the United States have been diagnosed with celiac sprue. As more Americans become diet conscious or are diagnosed with conditions that require a change in diet, the demand for sorghum flour has exploded.

### Rising to the Challenge

While sorghum flour has been used for human consumption in Asia and Africa for centuries, it is a comparatively new market in the United States. Gerald Simonsen, owner of Twin Valley Mills and a producer of food grade sor-

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"If your health depends on making the change from gluten products to gluten-free products, you will face the challenges and rise to them," says Simonsen.

### Making the Switch

"The transition from wheat flour to sorghum flour is more than just a simple substitution," says Simonsen. "There are significant challenges to gluten-free baking."

However, with help from Amy Middleton, owner of Gluten Free Life, the transition is a piece of cake. "Sorghum flour is the cornerstone of my bakery," says Middleton, who has created sorghum flour mixes for cakes, cookies, and muffins. "Other gluten-free substitutes have strength in the market because the products are cheap, but sorghum flour offers higher nutrient content versus other gluten-free substitutes."

"Currently, sorghum flour is demanded by a small percentage of the population, but as the number of diets that depend on gluten-free products are growing, the market has seen a growth," says Middleton. "Sorghum flour has not traditionally been available in your average store but it

is slowly mainstreaming to grocery stores."

### Beyond Celiac?

Dr. Virgil Smail, executive director of United Sorghum Checkoff Program, says sorghum flour can also be used for maintaining health, even for people who are not diagnosed with celiac sprue disease.

"The application and patents in the animal feeding industry for using sorghum as a low glycemic index feed can also be applied to human food for special dietary needs like hypoglyce-

mia and diabetes," says Smail, former president of the American Institute of Baking. "Basically, sorghum flour metabolizes at a slower rate than other flours."



Sorghum can be used to make many gluten-free foods that would otherwise be off limits to people with certain dietary restrictions.

### For Your Farm

"There is no additional cost to growing food grade sorghum," says Simonsen. "Food grade sorghum tends to have a better milling yield and quality and is different in color from commercial grade sorghum."

"The awareness of the gluten-free diet and of sorghum has grown significantly, thus a growth in demand for sorghum flour," says Simonsen. "Down the road, it is likely that farmers will start contracting with more mills. You have to get the critical mass [of demand] before farmers will start contracting."

While this market is still relatively small, with an estimated 2.5 million Americans yet to be diagnosed with celiac sprue disease and a need for healthier diets on the rise, this growing market has great potential. 🌿