

no pain

abdominal discomfort, nausea, flatulence and/or fatigue. Or in coeliac speak, “getting glutened”.

“The last time it happened, I felt like I was going to die. It’s the worst feeling,” said Smith. Ironically, this incident happened at a gluten-free event that she was holding. The food was wrongly prepared and she had to leave halfway through dinner.

Eric Thompson, owner of food review site Gluten Free Globe (glutenfreeglobe.com), says it’s easy to avoid “getting glutened” in China, as long as you have a good translator. “You have to ask that they make everything fresh for your order, to dust the chicken with potato or tapioca starch [rather than flour], and make sure they don’t put soy sauce on anything.”

Given the trouble coeliacs have to go through, you’d think no one would go gluten-free by choice.

But Tramontin says the demand for gluten-free products is driven not only by coeliac disease, but also by a trend that began in the US. “Although scientifically there is nothing to [support the claim], those who have gone on a gluten-free diet claim that it’s a much lighter diet and there is a higher degree of digestibility,” he says.

Publicity of the disease has risen thanks to celebrities eschewing gluten of late – most notably, Serbian professional tennis player Novak Djokovic, who attributes his improved performance to the diet change. Oprah Winfrey, Jennifer Aniston, and Gwyneth Paltrow have also temporarily turned to gluten-free dieting for purported health benefits and weight loss.

Those who adopt a gluten-free diet often reduce the amount of fried and calorie-dense foods they eat, so they naturally shed weight.

But Smith says it’s not a weight-loss tool. “I tell people: I’m not losing weight because I’m still eating the same food that you are – mine just doesn’t have any gluten in it.”

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Wholemeal recipe yields other-worldly muffins

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Shauna James Ahern’s gluten-free whole-grain muffin recipe produces muffins so ethereal, fluffy and tender they seem like pastries from another planet – a sweet one, without gravity – and better than most other whole-grain muffins made with whole-wheat flour.

Ahern recommends making your own flour blend rather than using a store-bought mix so that you can decide what ingredients you want to include or leave out.

She uses mostly whole-grain flours in her recipes, for two reasons. One is the increased nutrition. The other is that whole-grain flours have more protein than refined flours, and a high protein content is essential to good gluten-free baking. That is why high protein and

(sadly vegetal and metallic tasting) bean flours – garbanzo and fava – are often used in gluten-free flour mixes, to bump up the protein count.

Gums are another way to help the texture of gluten-free pastries. But they are expensive and can cause stomach irritation in some people. Ahern has cut them out of her baking entirely. The proper ratio of grain flour to starch should do the trick, she says.

Gluten-free flour blend

Adapted from Shauna James Ahern, Glutenfreegirl.com
Time: 5 minutes
Yield: a little more than 900 grams

200 grams oat flour or very finely ground rolled oats (about 2 cups)
250 grams brown rice flour (about 2 cups)
210 grams sorghum flour (about 2 cups)

40 grams corn flour or fine cornmeal (about 5 tablespoons)
150 grams potato starch (about 1 cup)
150 grams arrowroot (about 1 cup)

Mix everything together and store in an airtight container.

Gluten-free apricot-walnut muffins

Adapted from Shauna James Ahern, Glutenfreegirl.com
Time: 1 hour plus cooling
Yield: 12 muffins

Butter to grease the pan
350 grams gluten-free flour mix, purchased or home-made (see recipe)
½ teaspoon baking soda
¼ teaspoon baking powder
180 grams dark brown sugar
1 teaspoon kosher salt
2 large eggs, at room temperature
1¼ cups buttermilk, at room temperature
½ cup grapeseed or coconut oil
40 grams chopped dried apricots
40 grams toasted chopped walnuts

1. Heat oven to 180 degrees Celsius, with a rack in the middle. Grease a muffin tin.

2. Whisk together flour, baking soda, baking powder, sugar and salt.

3. In a separate bowl, whisk together the eggs, buttermilk and oil until well combined; add to the dry ingredients, using a rubber spatula to mix until the batter is almost fully incorporated. Add the apricots and walnuts and mix until all traces of flour are gone.

4. Fill muffin tins ¾ full. Bake until golden brown, the top is firm to the touch, and a toothpick comes out clean, about 30 minutes. Turn the tin around halfway through. Cool on a rack for 15 minutes. Run a knife along the edges of the muffins and unmold. Finish cooling muffins on a rack.

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Gluten-free wholemeal apricot-walnut muffins. Photo: Andrew Scrivani