# Heritage Wheat

## Some people with gluten sensitivity are eating wheat again

By Kelly Dorfman, MS, LND

Recently at a nutrition training session for psychotherapists, I was outlining the neurological and psychological symptoms associated with gluten sensitivity when a debate erupted in the audience. One therapist reported increasing numbers of her clients were taking gluten out of their diets and feeling better. A few audience members nodded their heads in agreement. Then a clinician in the front row crossed her arms over her chest and bellowed, “Isn’t this whole gluten-free movement just another dietary fad?”

The fad question inevitably arises whenever the subject of gluten-free living comes up. I explained that, unfortunately, the rising number of people reacting to gluten is not a fad.

Researchers theorize more people are reacting to gluten because modern day wheat is dramatically different from the wheat grown 50 years ago. Farmers have selectively bred wheat species for specific traits for hundreds of years but in the 1960’s, hybridization became a science. Scientists skillfully created wheat with the specific characteristics manufacturers and farmers wanted, such as bigger crop yields, disease resistance and even better baking characteristics.

The gluten molecule’s ability to capture air bubbles is what makes bread so stretchy and soft. While there is fierce debate over whether or not today’s wheat is more glutinous than the wheat of yore, we do know people today consume much more gluten because it’s added to many processed food products.

We also know that an analysis of 80 varieties of wheat found that modern wheat contains higher levels of two celiac disease epitopes. An epitope is the reactive part of a molecule, in this case, the wheat molecule that stimulates the immune system to respond. White blood cells respond to the epitope (sometimes referred to as an antigen), triggering symptoms. Selective breeding may or may not have increased the amount of gluten in wheat but hybridization* has definitely increased wheat’s reactive properties.

As I finished explaining gluten reactions, an audience member spoke up. “After ten years of being gluten sensitive, I heard about a pizza parlor that only used a special wheat flour from Italy. The owners swear people with gluten sensitivity can eat their pizza.” The audience was all ears.

“Another gluten-sensitive friend and I were doubtful but we decided to try it,” she continued. “Neither of us had any symptoms whatsoever. We were so happy to eat regular pizza that we returned every night for a week!”

The flour used by that pizza restaurant was Caputo 00, a finely ground flour with a medium-level gluten content of 12.5 percent. High gluten flour isn’t much higher (14 to 15 percent), so low gluten content is unlikely the explanation for the unexpected tolerance.

I decided to do my own experiment. I ordered Caputo flour over the Internet and made several batches of simple cookies with it, using only organic ingredients. I approached three people I knew who had become gluten sensitive as adults but did not have celiac disease. (People with celiac disease should not eat wheat products of any type.) They all agreed to try the cookies. After eating them, none of these people had their typical reactions.

My little experiment is similar to many anecdotal reports of people with gluten sensitivity successfully consuming heritage wheat varieties without reacting. These ancient versions of wheat, also called heirloom wheat, have not been subject to the rigorous crossbreeding and aggressive hybridization of conventional modern grains.

There is a growing movement of farmers, bakers and consumers experimenting with heritage grains as a way to address gluten sensitivity. The Heritage Grain Conservancy (growseed.org), a 25-year-old organization that preserves almost extinct seeds, reports the demand has been overwhelming.

While not safe for those with celiac disease, people with gluten sensitivity may be able to supplement their diet with heritage wheat, an idea that most should find easy to digest.

*Hybridization is a type of genetic modification but it’s not the same as genetically modified organisms (GMO). In GMO technology, a piece of DNA from one organism is inserted into an unrelated organism to create or enhance a specific characteristic, such as resistance to glyphosate, a weed-killing chemical. Most corn and soy sold in the United States are GMO but are not labeled as such.