



Lara Perry, 13, enjoys a bowl of uncontaminated oats.



# SAFE OATS

Puzzle  
over  
pure  
oats  
solved

By Amy Ratner

**F**or the first time, celiacs in North America will be able to buy oats considered safe on the gluten-free diet. Two companies, one in the United States, the other in Canada, harvested their first crop of uncontaminated oats last Fall and have started to sell them as rolled oats, whole oats and oat flour.

Many celiacs have been anxious to purchase uncontaminated oats ever since research showed that pure oats in limited amounts are safe. The only problem is pure oats have been virtually impossible to find. Until now.

The two companies producing uncontaminated oats go through expensive and painstaking steps to eliminate cross contamination, which has long kept oats off the gluten-free diet for Americans and Canadians. And both test for gluten at various steps along the way to be sure the oats don't contain any wheat, barley or rye.

The Gluten Free Oats Company in Powell, Wyoming, harvested 15 acres of oats. At press time, they planned to begin filling existing orders for rolled oats in March when the company's three-story dedicated mill was due to be completed. Also, at press

time, the company had already received 200 orders for its products.

Cream Hill Estates in LaSalle, Quebec, recently processed about 20 tons of oats. They are being sold as rolled oats (also called oat flakes), oat flour and whole oats. At press time, Cream Hill Estates had 60 stores waiting to carry its products, as well as inquiries from processors of gluten-free foods.

The desire for gluten-free oats is best summed up by a customer who wrote to the company in November. She said she had heard a rumor that the company was selling safe oats. "All I want for Christmas is a bag of those oats," she wrote.

But, like most gluten-free foods, oats won't come cheap. At about \$4 per pound, prices are more than three times the cost of regular oats.

Gluten-free oat farmers said they were aware upfront just how expensive and difficult running their businesses would be. But ironically, both companies were motivated by an owner's teenage child simply wanting to have oatmeal for breakfast.

"It has not been an easy process," Beth Armour, co-president

# EATING OATS ON THE GF DIET

Many celiacs mightily miss the taste of a morning bowl of oatmeal.

But it is the nutritional strength of oats that makes them a valuable addition to the gluten-free diet when uncontaminated by gluten-containing grains.

Oats contain dietary fiber, are low in cholesterol and fat, and are a good source of complex carbohydrates, protein and various nutrients.

The US Department of Agriculture's Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends foods high in fiber and low in fat for a healthy diet. Meanwhile, the American Heart Association says oats help lower blood cholesterol.

Celiacs have not been able to take advantage of the benefits of oats because of concern about contamination by wheat, barley or rye as a result of farming and milling practices.

Tricia Thompson, MS, RD, a member of the *Gluten-Free Living* dietetic advisory board, in 2004 conducted a study that showed most major brands of oatmeal are contaminated. But she noted that oats from a miller able to produce a consistently gluten-free product could be safe for celiacs.

Now, at least two companies are offering oats that are tested to guarantee them to be free of contamination.

Even with these oats, there is an air of caution and celiacs are advised to pay attention to how much and how often they eat them.

## GIG says yes to oats

The Gluten Intolerance Group, a Seattle-based celiac support group, says in its position on oats that up to one cup of cooked oats daily are safe for most people with celiac disease.

Peter Green, MD, director of the Celiac Disease Center at Columbia University (CDCC) tells patients eating oats to monitor their diet through annual blood tests, as well as "appropriately timed" biopsies. He says he

## Oats, continued.

of Cream Hill Estates, said. The company spent \$200,000 just getting set up. The seed costs 10 times that of regular oats; testing is \$75 per bag; and farmers have to be paid extra to take the additional time and steps needed to eliminate cross contamination.

But she said the company is driven by the determination of company co-president, Tracy Perry, to come up with a safe product for his daughter, who was diagnosed with celiac disease two years ago. "He asked, 'What will she have for breakfast? I have to solve this problem,'" Armour said.

Armour and Perry spent about a year on research and worked with the Canadian Celiac Society and Agriculture and Agri-Foods Canada, a government agency that oversees agriculture.

Producing oats for celiacs presented special problems in Canada. Food labeling laws there define "gluten free" as foods that do not contain oats, as well as wheat, barley and rye. However, the Canadian Celiac Association in May endorsed limited amounts of pure, uncontaminated oats as safe on the gluten-free diet. That means that while the pure oats cannot be labeled gluten free, they are still considered safe in Canada.

In the United States, there is currently no definition for the term gluten-free. The Food and Drug Administration under a new allergen labeling law, has to come up with a definition by 2008 and is trying to determine what to do about oats. But many in the gluten-free community, including the Celiac Disease Center at Columbia University, the American Dietetic Association, and the Gluten Intolerance Group say they are safe for most celiacs when uncontaminated and eaten in limited amounts.

Cream Hill Estates will label its oats differently in Canada and the United States because of the different laws in each country. Gluten Free Oats is currently only selling its product in the United States and won't have to contend with the labeling differences.

Gluten Free Oats turned to the University of

Nebraska's Food Allergy Research and Resource program and the Wyoming Seed Certification Service for help determining exactly what steps and tests were needed to guarantee the purity of the oats.

## Goal: Pure oats

Seaton Smith, company president, had first tinkered with supplying gluten-free oats when his son, Forrest, received a grant from Future Farmers of America to purchase a mill to process oats as a small business. Smith, his son, his wife and his mother-in-law all have celiac disease.

Forrest Smith found the purest supplier he could and sold the oats to a small group of fellow celiacs in his support group who knew what the limitations were. The demand was so great, the family decided to find completely uncontaminated oats and expand into a full-scale business. What they learned was that it would be a complicated, demanding process, even for a family that understood the desire for gluten-free oats.

"A lot of people are looking at me and saying, 'You are over cautious.' But I know our people," Smith said.

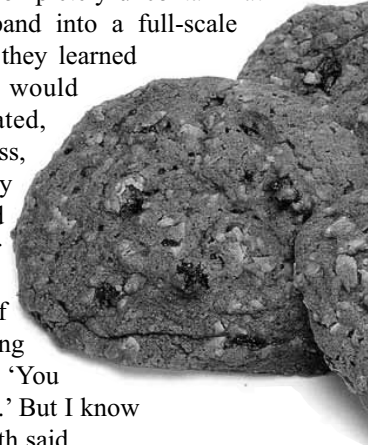
Most oats milled in the United States are likely to be cross-contaminated with about 2 to 3 percent of other grains, according to Jane DeMarchi, coordinator of technical and export programs for the North American Millers Association. At a

recent Food and Drug Administration meeting, she said some degree of cross contamination is unavoidable in the processing of grains.

It is even recognized in grain standards set by the US Department of Agriculture. USDA standards for oats allow up to 25 percent contamination with wild oats and other grains, but DeMarchi said it would be rare to find that level in milled oats.

The companies that are

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producing uncontaminated oats have to take extra precautions to prevent any cross contamination.

The first step comes with selection of oat seed, which for both companies is a higher grade than would normally be planted by an oat farmer. Cream Hill Estates used a seed that had less than one non-oat seed per 25,000 seeds of oats. Gluten Free Oats used seed that is 99 percent pure.

Both companies used fields where no gluten-containing crops had been grown for three years to prevent the possibility that those crops would grow with the oats and contaminate them. And they made sure the fields were separated from those with gluten-containing crops by barriers created by distance or ditches.

Inspectors also visited both company's fields while the oats were growing. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency routinely looked for contamination at Cream Hill Estates. When the agency found any plant that didn't belong in the field it was removed. The farmer also walked through the field to find and pull out anything that was not oats.

### Conquering Contamination

Gluten Free Oats contracted the Wyoming Seed Certification Service to inspect its field. A report issued by the service noted that only two wheat plants had been found, and they were removed.

Farm equipment and transportation of the oats were the next areas of concern. Gluten Free Oats uses combines that are not used for any crops that contain gluten, Smith said. Afterward, the oats are loaded into industrial-size, food-grade totes or sacks to be carried to the mill where they are cleaned, hulled, steamed and rolled.

Cream Hill Estates uses equipment that is dedicated to the pure oats or is cleaned with both high pressure air and an industri-

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al vacuum to eliminate cross contamination, according to Armour. Trucks, wagons and storage bins are handled the same way. The mill, which processes only soy and oats, is also cleaned. Packaging equipment is dedicated to the pure oats.

In addition to these precautions, both companies also test their products at various points to make sure they do not contain gluten. Cream Hill Estates oats were tested at a laboratory certified by the Canadian government.

Perry said the oats were tested when they came out of the combine, after they were cleaned at the farm and when they arrived at the processing plant for packaging. The company used a test that could find gluten as low as 2 parts per million (ppm) and its oat flakes and whole oats tested at an average of 2.1 ppm, far less than minimum standards for gluten-free foods. Gluten Free Oats were tested to 3 ppm by the University of Nebraska and found to have no detectable gluten.

"The process really gets complicated," Smith said, noting that although he was raised on a farm, his profession is computer technical support. "You have to keep thinking, 'What about this and what about that?'"

But he said he is motivated by the attitude his son, who at 17 is the company's production manager, has shown ever since he was diagnosed with celiac disease. "I'm proud that instead of a 'Woe is me' attitude, he is doing something positive."

Cream Hill Estates also looks to a teenager for motivation. Thirteen year-old Lara Perry summed it up when she wrote this about her father's company: "I didn't really have any choice for breakfast until my dad and his friend started a business where oats aren't contaminated."

*Amy Ratner is associate editor of Gluten-Free Living. She has a teenage daughter who has had celiac disease since she was two-years-old. Her daughter has no memory of ever eating oatmeal for breakfast and is not enticed by its appearance. She is, however, very interested in tasting oatmeal cookies.*

advises eating oats because, in addition to fiber, they add variety to the very restricted gluten-free diet.

Anne Roland Lee, RD, Nutritionist at the CDCC, said patients are advised to gradually add oats to their diet, in much the same way new foods are introduced to an infant -- that is slowly, with a careful eye out for reactions.

She recommends one quarter of a cup, followed by a few days with no oats, then another quarter cup serving. If that is well tolerated, patients can have one-half to one cup every other day, and then every day. Lee said this pattern is recommended whenever a new gluten-free grain is added to the celiac diet to make sure no other intolerance exists.

The Canadian Celiac Association in its position statement on oats says clinical evidence confirms that consumption of pure, uncontaminated oats from 50 to 70 grams per day for adults or about one-half cup, and 20 to 25 grams, or about one-quarter cup, daily for children is safe.

### Adjusting to Fiber

When a celiac first starts to eat oats, he or she might develop symptoms including stomach upset, gas or diarrhea, all of which can result from an increase in fiber.

Green in his book says very few have any type of immune reaction. A gradual introduction of oats is usually a good idea to allow for adjustment to the increased fiber.

Some celiacs cannot tolerate even very small amounts of gluten, Green says. It is not clear whether this is a gluten reaction or an allergic reaction to oats.

Even as oats gain acceptance, some celiac groups and medical experts do not yet recommend including them on the GF diet.

-Amy Ratner

*Gluten Free Oats, 578 Lane 9,  
Powell, WY 82435, 307-754-2058  
www.glutenfreeoats.com.*

*Cream Hill Estates, 1-866-727-3628  
www.creamhillestates.com.*

Try these gluten-free delights!

## Monster Cookies

¼ cup butter, room temperature  
¾ cup sugar  
¾ cup brown sugar  
2 eggs  
1 tsp gf vanilla  
1 cup peanut butter  
1 ¼ tsp baking soda  
3 cups Gluten Free rolled Oats®  
6 ounces of gf chocolate chips or M & Ms  
½ cup gf sunflower seeds or chopped walnuts, optional

Preheat oven at 350°.

Beat sugar, brown sugar and butter until creamy. Add eggs, vanilla and baking soda and mix well. Add peanut butter and mix. Stir in oats, chocolate chips and nuts. Place teaspoon full of dough on a lightly greased cookie sheet about 2 inches apart.

Bake for 10-12 minutes until lightly brown around edges.

## Aunt Jean's Granola

8 cups Gluten Free rolled Oats®  
1 cup gf sunflower seeds  
1 cup coconut  
1 cup powered milk  
1 cup soy flour  
1 cup chopped almonds  
1 cup honey  
½ cup peanut butter  
½ cup salad oil  
2 teaspoons vanilla (optional)

Mix dry ingredients. Mix honey, oil and peanut butter and add to dry mix. Bake at 275 degrees on three cookie sheets mixing every 10-15 minutes during the baking process until toasted.

*Recipes courtesy of the Gluten Free Oats Company.*

## CAN I EAT OATS?

We are frequently asked: "What's the story on oats?" Briefly, here is the answer.

The part oats played in the gluten-free diet was clear to American celiac patients prior to 1995. They were not permitted. Period.

Then, in 1995, a well-designed Finnish research study suggested that oats in limited amounts are safe for those who follow a gluten-free diet. Other studies supported the Finnish research.

Oats are approved for the gluten-free diet in Finland and the United Kingdom, among other countries. But until very recently, no one "approved" oats for the gluten-free diet here in the United States.

Whatever the concerns about the safety of oats, there has been universal agreement that the only safe oats are those that are uncontaminated. So for the last ten years or so, many celiacs have been waiting expectantly for the day when pure oats would be available on the market. Now that day has arrived.

Some celiacs now consume commercial oats. The combination of the availability of pure oats and the recent seal of approval from the Celiac Center at Columbia University, the American Dietetic Association and the Gluten Intolerance Group should result in a boost in celiac confidence in oats.

Like everything else, the answer to the question "Can I eat oats?" is up to you. Our goal is to report the latest news as accurately as possible so you will be able to make an informed decision. If you do decide to consume oats, it would be important to check with your physician first.

*-Ann Whelan*