

## Bellingham businesses adjust to meet demand for gluten-free



Anna Rankin, co-owner of Bellingham Pasta Company and The Table, produces gluten-free pasta in the mornings, allowing flour dust from the previous day to settle. Gluten-free pasta was recently added to the menu to meet a growing customer demand. Ryan Wynne | BBJ

by [Ryan Wynne](#)

Filed on 11. Jul, 2011 in [Features](#)

In the 10 years Flax 4 Life muffins have adorned grocery store shelves, the Omega-3- and fiber-rich product has undergone only one major change: inclusion of a small stamp of approval on the packaging certifying the product as gluten-free.

The muffins have always been made with gluten-free ingredients, but it wasn't until two years into selling them that the company's owners realized there might be a market for gluten-free products, said Kasondra Shippen, general manager and co-owner of the family-owned Bellingham bakery. That's when Shippen's uncle, one of the healthiest

people she knew, lost his ability to walk for no apparent reason and his doctors couldn't determine why.

Her uncle eventually ended up at the Mayo Clinic, a medical nonprofit doing breakthrough celiac disease research. It was there where he was diagnosed with celiac disease, an under-diagnosed disorder where those affected cannot properly breakdown the protein gluten, which is in one of America's staples: wheat. He eliminated gluten from his diet and was able to walk again within a week, Shippen said.

When Shippen decided to market her family's muffins as a gluten-free product, there were only a handful of businesses doing the same.

Five years ago, Flax 4 Life was one of about five gluten-free vendors at a major natural food expo in California; this year, the company was one of about 500, Shippen said.

"There weren't very many competing companies," Shippen said. But that has changed, she added. "All the markets want it now."

More companies are producing gluten-free foods because the demand for them is growing, and that increased demand is more than a matter of awareness. The number of people with celiac disease has gone up significantly over the past several decades.

"Going gluten-free means changing a lot. There's not having gluten in a product and there's not having gluten on or around a product." Jean Layton, naturopathic physician

Celiac disease is four times more common than it was 60 years ago, according to a [2010 Mayo Clinic study](#). Conservative estimates put the rate of affliction today at about every one in 100 people.

Shippen's uncle isn't the only person in her family who has difficulty breaking down gluten. Her father, a fellow co-owner of Flax 4 Life, and her brother also have the disorder.

### **Meeting a growing demand**

The rate of celiac disease in Bellingham isn't likely out of the ordinary, but awareness in the area is impressive.

Bellingham has two gluten-intolerance support groups and at least two people teaching gluten-free cooking classes. One of those cooking instructors is Jean Layton, a local naturopathic physician who calls herself "the gluten-free doctor" and recently co-authored "Gluten-Free Baking for Dummies," which is scheduled for release later this year.

That amount of awareness is unusual for a town of only 80,000, Layton said.

And celiac disease awareness has worked its way into area businesses. There are at least seven bakeries in town that offer gluten-free or mostly gluten-free products. Bellingham

has locally made, gluten-free donuts, scones, muffins and even gluten-free man pies. A lot of local menus bear a “GF” footnote.

One such restaurant is [The Table](#), which was opened in July 2010 by Bellingham Pasta Company owners. Katie Hinton said she and the other owners decided to produce a mostly gluten-free pasta for one simple reason: demand.



Katie Hinton, left, and Anna Rankin, Bellingham Pasta Company co-owners, recently started producing gluten-free pasta for retail and their restaurant. Ryan Wynne | BBJ

Every Saturday at the Bellingham Farmers Market, at least two to three customers would ask for gluten-free pasta, Hinton said, and restaurant customers were making the same request. The building requests were enough to convince them, Hinton said — the company now serves gluten-free pasta at The Table and is in the process of expanding retail sales beyond the Bellingham Farmers Market.

It wasn't exactly an easy decision, though. Producing gluten-free pasta meant more work for Hinton. Firstly, she had to find a recipe that worked.

“Some looked great, but didn't taste right,” Hinton said. “It's just a completely different chemistry.”

It took Hinton and her cohorts four months to develop gluten-free pasta with a flavor and texture that met their standards. The extra work didn't stop there, though. They had to come up with a system to keep as much wheat flour as they could out of their gluten-free pasta.

“This is definitely a wheat facility — there's wheat everywhere,” Hinton said.

### **Worth the extra work**

While Bellingham Pasta Company dubs its product gluten-free, that name comes with a disclaimer on every pasta package and restaurant menu letting patrons know it is produced in a facility that also processes wheat.

Layton said that kind of disclaimer is an extremely important step that a lot of businesses miss, and missing it can cause trusting consumers to develop symptoms ranging from discomfort to anaphylactic shock.

“Going gluten-free means changing a lot,” Layton said. “There’s not having gluten in a product and there’s not having gluten on or around a product.”

Layton works as a consultant for local restaurant owners, advising them how to keep their gluten-free products gluten-free. There are a lot of simple changes they can make to stop gluten contamination, including having a dedicated fryer for gluten-free foods and putting bags over mixers whilst wheat and other gluten substances are being stirred around.

But some businesses would have to make big, expensive changes to ensure products were completely gluten-free, and for many, that is not an option.

Hinton knows she will never be able to clean all of the wheat particles off of her pasta machine, and buying an entirely different machine isn’t a reasonable option for the small business.

So she chooses to make it as clear as possible that her product may contain some wheat. At the same time, she takes a lot of precautions to keep that amount to a minimum. She makes the gluten-free pasta first thing in the morning, giving flour dust from the previous day time to settle. She also cleans every surface and the pasta machine thoroughly, no matter how shiny it looks before she starts the gluten-free pasta making process.

And when The Table’s chef, Rob Morrell, prepares gluten-free pasta, he is careful to use a separate pot to cook it in and utensils to scoop it up with.

Hinton thinks that extra work will pay off. Families and friends have a lot of different dietary needs and this will allow them to dine together, which should attract more people to the restaurant.

Morrell agreed: “Taking care of people’s dietary needs is just part of having a restaurant in 2011.”

Marketing to the gluten intolerant has been good for Flax 4 Life. The business started out with two people and now has 15. And production jumped from 500 pounds of batter per day to 7,000, with a goal of 10,000 pounds in the near future. The company also more than [tripled its production space](#) recently.

“It was pretty slow at first and then it just kind of exploded,” Shippen said.

Shippen attributes that success not only to her product’s healthy ingredients, but also to one missing ingredient: gluten.