

GF scoop on soda, soup, certification seals & more

By Amy Ratner

Q. I am grateful that your magazine is available. I am not yet officially diagnosed, but may need to follow a gluten-free diet. Right now I have a question about soft drinks. Are regular ginger ale, Coke and Pepsi gluten free? What about other soft drinks or sodas in general? Thank you for any guidance you can provide.

A. Most sodas are gluten free. The ingredient that raises questions most often is the caramel color. Although caramel color can be made from barley, it is most often made from corn.

The Pepsi-Cola Company said there is no gluten in any carbonated soft drink produced by the company in North America.

The caramel color used in Pepsi beverages is not derived from wheat, oats, barley, rye, spelt or triticale, the company said.

Diana Garza Ciarlante, a spokeswoman for the Coca-Cola Company, said the caramel color used in Coke products is derived from either corn or cane sugar. If an ingredient contains wheat, barley or rye it is labeled as such in the ingredient statement. Consumers can also check the gluten-free status of Coke products by calling the 1-800 number on the product's package.

A list provided by Ciarlante included, but is not limited to, the following sodas: Barq's root beer (regular, diet, caffeine free, and diet red crème), Coke (regular, diet, diet plus, caffeine free diet, diet sweetened with Splenda, diet with lime, cherry, diet cherry, cherry zero, diet, vanilla, vanilla zero), Coca-Cola (regular, caffeine free classic and zero), and Sprite (regular, diet zero). Coke makes a number of fruit drinks, teas, bottled waters and other drinks that are also gluten free.

Q. I was teaching my 12-year-old daughter how to read labels. She asked whether she should eat things that say "natural flavorings." I told her that if there is an allergy warning and wheat is not listed, then the natural flavorings are fine, but otherwise she shouldn't. What do you think?

A. If a natural flavoring contains wheat, the label has to say so. It could be in the kind of allergen warning you mention, which would say "Contains Wheat" after the ingredients list. Wheat could also be noted right in the ingredients list as "natural flavoring (wheat)."

But natural flavoring rarely contains wheat. Flavoring manufacturers, including both natural and artificial, have told us that wheat is rarely used to make a flavoring because it does not work very well. We have been checking ingredients lists on food labels for wheat in a flavoring ever since the Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act was passed. It requires that wheat be labeled regardless of how it is used in all products regulated by the Food and Drug Administration.

We have seen very few cases where wheat is used. Edy's French Silk ice cream is one of the rare products that contains natural flavoring made from wheat, and wheat is indicated on the label. So, since wheat is rarely used in flavorings and when it is, processors have been following the labeling law, your instructions for your daughter are fair and safe as far as wheat is concerned.

That would leave flavorings made from barley (rye and oats would rarely if ever be used). The allergen labeling law does not require barley to be listed as the source of a flavoring because barley is not one of the top eight allergens. In most cases a flavoring made from barley

will be called malt flavoring or barley malt or barley malt flavoring. In general your daughter should avoid malt flavoring. (Malt flavoring can be made from corn and would be safe, but it is more commonly made from barley.)

So you have to decide if your daughter should avoid flavors on the very small chance one might be made from barley that's not spelled out on the label. She would be avoiding a lot of foods that are actually safe. As always, it's your call. But you do ask what we think and the answer seems to us that the risk is so small, it's not worth worrying about.

Q. I was recently diagnosed with celiac disease after struggling with health issues for years. What a blessed relief to know. My husband and I have fallen in love with Stonyfield Greek yogurt—Oikos—is it gluten free? I am not sure because it is not certified gluten free like some other Stonyfield yogurts.

A. Here's what Stonyfield says about its Greek yogurt.

All of our yogurts, smoothies, and soy-yogurts—except for our YoBaby Plus Fruit & Cereal, YoKids Squeezers, Oikos Greek Yogurt, and frozen yogurt—are certified gluten-free by the Gluten-Free Certification Organization (GFCO). And we're in the process of getting our other products certified too.

We didn't change these yogurts, smoothies, and soy-yogurts to make them gluten-free. They already were gluten-free. The only change is that we've completed the certification process administered by the GFCO and can now officially say "gluten-free" and print the GFCO symbol on our packages.

They are not saying the Greek yogurt is not gluten free, just that they have not

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yet completed the steps to receive certification. And they note that the other kinds of yogurts did not require any changes because they were always gluten free, even before being certified. That's most likely the story for the Greek yogurt too. So you can wait for the certification or take what would appear to be a very insignificant risk and enjoy the yogurt now.

This brings up an important point about certification. The certification seal from GFCO or the Celiac Sprue Association gives you extra assurance that a product meets those organizations' standards for gluten free. (See story page 29 for more details about certification.)

But many products that do not have a certification seal are still gluten free. Some have a "gluten free" label. For others, you have to read the ingredients list to be sure the food does not contain any wheat, barley, or rye.

Q. I can not tolerate xanthan or guar gum and I am having problems making gluten-free bread. I wondered if you had any other advice for someone who can't use these ingredients. Thanks for you help.

A. We asked Carol Fenster, author of *1,000 Gluten-Free Recipes* and president and founder of Savory Palate, Inc., what ingredients might be substituted for xanthan or guar gum. Here's what she said:

Unfortunately, our gluten-free yeast bread, especially the 9x5-inch size loaf, is much better with gums. The gums provide a cell structure, replacing the function of gluten, in which the carbon dioxide can expand to make the bread rise.

You could try making popovers, which can successfully be made without gums since they are bound by lots of eggs. Pull out the soft interior and stuff the popovers with sandwich filling.

Also, try Focaccia, which is a flatbread and doesn't have to rise very much to be successful—but be sure to use eggs. A teaspoon of unflavored gelatin mixed in with the dry ingredients might provide some structure, but won't be as successful as gums.

Or, try spreading the Focaccia dough over a 13x9-inch nonstick pan to make a very thin flatbread that can be simply torn and dipped in oil. It is supposed to be very thin and the crumbliness that results from omitting the gums won't be as noticeable.

Q. In one of your recent issues, I read the answer to the *plate* question, "Are pickles gluten free?" It said that the vinegar is distilled and is gluten free.

In products which contain vinegar, it never states on the label whether the vinegar is made from grain or fruit (except if the product is just plain vinegar), so are you saying that even vinegar specifically made from wheat is "safe" to consume?

If your answer is no, then how can label-reading celiacs know the origin of the vinegar?

A. Your letter makes it clear there is still a lot of confusion about vinegar. Distillation is a process that effectively removes the gluten protein even if wheat is used. Consequently, distilled vinegar made from wheat is gluten free.

However, most vinegar is not made from wheat. Apple, corn, grape and rice sugars are the most frequently used sources. The bottom line is that all distilled vinegars are safe on the gluten-free diet so you don't have to worry about the source being listed on the label.

Q. What are the facts regarding vanilla and vanilla extract? I've read that because they are alcohol-based they contain gluten.

A. That's old and unfounded information. Distilled alcohol, like distilled vinegar, is gluten free. So vanilla and vanilla extract are gluten free.

Q. In your list of allowed ingredients, modified food starch is listed as allowed if it's not made from wheat and, according to you, the label will state if it is. I blinked a few times, scoffed, and then decided to trust the advice. I bought a can of Campbell's bean with bacon soup, which lists modified food starch, but no wheat.

So I ate it. That was a mistake. I have a headache and my gut is feeling achy. I think it might be advisable to modify (heh) the advice, giving it only a cautious nod, because Campbell's doesn't mention allergens on their labels, neither does Heinz ketchup or KC Masterpiece BBQ sauce. I'm going to go back to giving a wide berth to products with the ambiguous modified food starch listing. It's just not worth it.

A. Like every other food company regulated by the FDA, Campbell's is required

to list the top eight allergens, including wheat, on its food labels. So if they use modified wheat starch, the label has to say either "modified wheat starch" or "modified food starch" as well as the phrase "contains wheat" at the end of the ingredients list. There is nothing ambiguous about it and no evidence that any companies are skirting the Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act, which has been in effect since January 2006. If wheat is in a product, its presence will be noted on the label.

From the labeled ingredients, the soup appears to be gluten free. The last few ingredients on the list are "less than two percent of modified food starch, salt, sugar, onion powder, monosodium glutamate, yeast extract, natural smoke flavoring." That wording is a bit ambiguous in terms of the two percent, but we read it as two percent of all those ingredients together not two percent each. Either way, it's not modified wheat starch.

However, Campbell's does not include the bean with bacon soup on its new gluten-free product list. Broths are the only soups on the list. On its website Campbell's says it is testing all finished products. That means those with gluten-free ingredients could be left off the list due to cross-contamination. We contacted Campbell's to find out why they do not consider the bean with bacon soup gluten free but did not get a response.

It's also a mistake to blame symptoms on gluten when they could be caused by any number of things. You might have consumed something a bit "off" with the soup or have a stomach bug or allergies . . . the list could go on. There's a lot going on that surrounds the food industry and has nothing to do with gluten as well as illnesses and germs and sometimes it's just too wearisome to think about. Our chances of ever getting to the bottom of some of these headachy experiences are slim.

But one thing you can be sure of is wheat labeling—or lack of same. If you see wheat on a food label, the product contains wheat. If you don't, the product does not contain wheat. It may not be gluten free or contaminant free, but it does not contain wheat.

Send your questions to
amy@glutenfreeliving.com