

Safe Communion Hosts

By Sister Jeanne Crowe

For a long time, the inability to receive communion hosts, which are made primarily from wheat and water, was a major frustration for Catholics who follow a gluten-free diet. Although some faiths allowed use of altar bread made from safe grains, Catholic Canon Law prohibited use of additives or “foreign matter.” The host had to contain enough gluten from wheat to give the confection of bread.

Several years ago, a group of Benedictine sisters in Missouri developed a low-gluten host that contained just enough wheat to satisfy Canon Law, but not enough to cause damage for those who have celiac disease. It was approved by the Catholic Church for use at Mass. That marked the end of a long struggle for gluten-free Catholics who had to stay away from the wheat-based Communion wafer as part of the gluten-free diet.

The host is of great importance to Catholics, who view Communion as the embodiment of Jesus and include it as a sacrament in their faith.

A ten-year labor of love

It took ten years of perseverance, trial and error for the Benedictine Sisters to develop a host that would be safe for those on the gluten-free diet and acceptable to the Catholic church.

Early in their pursuit, the Sisters used

spelt flour because they thought it had a lower gluten content than other wheat varieties* and might be acceptable for some who followed the diet but not others. But further investigation showed that spelt really was a form of wheat and not acceptable for any celiacs.

Initially the Sisters tried to make the hosts from wheat starch and water. However, this proved unacceptable. With such an extremely low amount of gluten in the wheat starch, the mixture spread too thinly on the baking sheet and then became impossible to remove without destroying it.

The Sisters eventually turned to the Manildra Corporation, a company

* For years some spelt processors had insisted that spelt was safe for some people who follow a gluten-free diet. But spelt is a form of wheat and is not safe for anyone who follows a gluten-free diet.

Those who are allergic to wheat may be able to tolerate spelt, but an allergy is not the same as sensitivity or intolerance to gluten. In fact, the Food and Drug Administration has specifically said that spelt is a form of wheat covered by the Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act. That means any food that contains spelt has to be labeled as containing wheat.

that has a 50-year history of separating wheat flour into its two components, wheat starch and wheat gluten. A representative suggested that the Sisters try a mixture of wheat starch and pregelatinized wheat starch, which is also extremely low in gluten. Pregelatinized starch differs from plain starch in that some of the starch granules have been ruptured. This helps to create a stickier mixture.

Sister Lynn, OSB, who worked on project from the start, said she thought the first try would be a failure because the batter was so sticky that she could not push it off the spoon with her fingers. Her apprehension disappeared when she baked the batter. The host stayed together, did not stick to the baking sheet and was round and crisp. Then it was just a matter of time until the optimal ratio of wheat starch to pregelatinized wheat starch was discovered and a usable product became a reality.

How much gluten?

Each low-gluten host is produced and packaged in a dedicated environment. The hosts are made separately by hand, unlike common altar breads which are stamped out of thin sheets of bread by a cutter. Therefore each host is a slightly different size and shape.

Most importantly, the final product has been checked for gluten content. The analysis was performed

by the American Institute of Baking (AIB International) using the ELISA (enzyme-linked, immunosorbent assay). According to Sister Lynn, the result of this analysis was reported as “no gluten detected.” Since the lowest limit of gluten detection of this analysis is 0.01%, the hosts are labeled as having 0.01% gluten content.

Realistically speaking, the actual gluten content is most likely lower because no gluten could be detected by this assay. The tests used were not capable of detecting gluten at lesser amounts so there is no way to know just how much lower than 0.01% the hosts really are.

In an effort to quantify the amount of gluten present in an individual host, I weighed several hosts of different sizes and calculated the theoretical maximum gluten content of each, using both entire hosts and one-quarter pieces. I had access to a university chemistry lab balance that can accurately weigh to 0.001 gram. I then calculated 0.01% of that weight which, in theory, is the maximum amount of gluten that could be present based on the ELISA analysis of the hosts. On average, a whole host could contain no more than 37 micrograms of gluten. A quarter of a host, on average, would contain no more than 7.8 micrograms of gluten. (The division is not exact because the hosts were not of equal size to begin with so the quarter sections also were different sizes.)

In the United States, most of us are more familiar with weights such as ounces and pounds. To refresh your “metric memory,” there are 29 grams in an ounce. A milligram is 1/1000 of a gram whereas a microgram is 1/100,000,000 of a gram. Therefore a microgram would be equivalent

0.000000035 ounce or 0.035 millionths of an ounce. This is an extremely small and obviously undetectable amount.

The new hosts received the blessing of the Catholic Church. Enclosed with each package of hosts is an insert quoting the November 2003 newsletter of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Secretariat for the Liturgy:

“The Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Clyde Missouri have developed a low-gluten host. The total gluten content of this product is 0.01%; its contents of unleavened bread and water and free of additives conform to the requirements of the Code of Canon Law, canon 924.2.

This “low-gluten” content is still enough gluten to confect bread for the Eucharist. Many gluten-intolerant persons may be able to consume it or some portion of it, but are strongly advised to check with their personal physician in advance. This product is the only true, low-gluten altar bread known to the Secretariat and approved for use at Mass in the United States.”

Approval of Host Needed

In November, 2003, the United States Conference of Bishops disseminated new guidelines concerning the use of low-gluten hosts by both priests and lay members of the Church. Two changes made to the existing regulations make it much easier for those who follow a gluten-free diet to use the host.

First the bishop of the diocese (the specified area under the bishop’s jurisdiction) can delegate the authority to grant permission to use the low-gluten host to the pastors under him. Since there is only one bishop but many more pastors, this makes it

easier to reach someone with the authority to grant permission.

Second, Catholics seeking permission to use a low-gluten host no longer need to present medical certification of their condition when they make their request, as they had to do in the past. They simply have to ask. Once permission is granted, it is valid for as long as the medical condition exists, which in the case of celiac disease is for life.

You will need to check with officials in your diocese to find out who has authority to approve your request. However, permission to use a low-gluten host in your own diocese does not extend to another diocese. So when you travel or go on vacation, you will need to contact the pastor of the parish where you plan to attend Mass to find out what you need to do to get approval to use a low-gluten host.

Sister Jeanne Patricia Crowe, Pharm. D., R.Ph, is a member of the Gluten-Free Living Editorial Advisory Board. She is a practicing pharmacist who has spoken about the gluten content in pharmaceuticals. Sister Jeanne is also a professed member of the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary community.

For more information go to www.benedictinesisters.org, then click on altar bread.

This is a modified version of an article that appeared previously in **Gluten-Free Living**. Questions are still raised about these hosts particularly by parents whose gluten-free children are ready to receive their First Holy Communion. Please feel free to copy and share it with others. Go to glutenfreeliving.com to subscribe and for more information on the gluten-free lifestyle.