

Hasselbeck's view: G Free is hot

By Amy Ratner



ELISABETH HASSELBECK'S new book is unlike any other the gluten-free community has ever seen.

Start with the cover. Gone are the photos or drawings of tempting gluten-free foods used by just about every gluten-free author in the past. Instead, there's a tower of goodies bursting with wheat being pushed aside by a pouty Hasselbeck, all dolled up in tight jeans, a sleeveless white blouse, her waist cinched by a big black belt. She's wearing big hoop earrings and her hair is poofed up and pulled back.

If that's not all hip enough, she's coined a trendy new way to refer to the gluten-free diet right in the title, "The G Free Diet." No dash, just big, bold orange letters.

I say start with the cover because that's just the beginning. The book's publicity tour was launched on *The View*, where Hasselbeck has a regular seat. From there it was onto *Good Morning America*, Rachel Ray, a variety of Fox news shows, Larry King, Jay Leno and Access Hollywood.

Who would have ever thought we would see the day when an Access Hollywood reporter, who only the week before was touching the abs of a Hollywood hunk on air, would be saying the words "celiac disease" to millions of viewers?

After the early years of fighting for every mention in small town newspapers and minor market television stations, and more recently even seeing stories in the *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Chicago Tribune*, and on CNN, the attention was more than most in the gluten-free community could have imagined.

For a long time before Elisabeth Hasselbeck appeared on the scene there was an almost palpable desire for a high profile celebrity with celiac disease who could use their clout to raise awareness. Yes, there was Rich Gannon, who did some publicity work after his daughter was diagnosed around the time he was a quarterback in the Super Bowl. And news anchor Heidi Collins has lent her name, energy and connection to CNN.

But Hasselbeck's profile is much higher, especially following her years as the odd-conservative-out on the liberal *View* panel. And she's no shrinking violet, as evidenced by her introduction to

television audiences as a participant on the reality show *Survivor* and her head-to-head combat with Rosie O'Donnell and just about everyone else on the *View*.

So I'm not surprised Hasselbeck just went out on her own and started sharing her thoughts and opinions on what the gluten-free—make that G free—diet is about and what it can do.

Almost immediately, the reaction in parts of the gluten-free community was discomfort. In others it was disdain.

Here she was on television telling people celiac disease is an allergy, that it's a great weight loss plan, that it's a medically accepted way to treat autism. For those in the gluten-free community, these errors were glaring. Celiac disease is an auto-immune disorder. Its only treatment is a lifelong gluten-free diet, which is designed to remove the protein that destroys the absorbing lining of the small intestine, not a way to lose weight. And while some children with autism have been helped by the gluten-free diet, it is not recognized as a treatment by the medical community.

But the fact of the matter is her book, which does clarify some of the things she said on TV and radio, will sell.

The book begins with Hasselbeck's story about diagnosing herself with celiac disease after her stint on *Survivor*. She found that although she was eating little food as a contestant required to exist with the bare minimum of essentials, she felt better than she had in years because her stomach problems had disappeared.

Hasselbeck's self-diagnosis runs counter to medical advice that you get tested for celiac disease before going on a gluten-free diet to make sure test results are accurate, a point she notes in another chapter later in the book.

Peter Green, MD, director of the Celiac Disease Center at Columbia University, who treats Hasselbeck and wrote the forward to the book, notes that her symptoms were resolved and her health restored. "In this setting," he writes, "it can be pretty clear whether someone does or could have celiac disease. Evidence includes the presence of the necessary genes and usually some evidence of residual vitamin or mineral deficiency. Frequently we find other family member have the disease, further confirming that the original patient was correct."

Green's endorsement of the book and his input throughout its pages give it credibility it otherwise might not have.

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But some things that baffle me include Hasselbeck's message of empowerment and self-determination in getting a diagnosis, followed by the fearful and flawed way she sometimes approaches the diet.

Many times she warns her readers away from products and ingredients that are very unlikely to contain gluten. For example, she repeats incorrectly that stamp adhesive is likely to contain gluten when the Postal Service says wheat is not used. She says you have to stay away from all pre-made marinades when the only ones you have to worry about are those with gluten—many are gluten free. She says de-clumping agents in spices often contain gluten when they don't. "Run the other way," is her advice regarding natural flavors, but these rarely are made from wheat. When they are, the label on most food has to say "wheat." While barley does not have to be listed, it is usually identified as malt flavoring.

Practical matters

On the other hand, Hasselbeck devotes some space in the book to giving counsel for those times when you might give in to temptation and eat something you know contains gluten.

I would think someone who is suspicious of the very small possibility of ingesting a minute amount of gluten in an ingredient would not consider uncontrollably eating double stuffed Oreos, as Hasselbeck says she once did in her early days on the gluten-free diet.

The chapter "How not to be a Party Pooper" is filled with suggestions that run counter to Hasselbeck's stance that the gluten-free life should be embraced and lived to its fullest.

She advises snacking on a gluten-free food you bring to a party "secretly" to avoid those times when you don't want to have to explain your diet. And she describes how she and her husband go through a ritual of plate swapping when they attend sit-down dinner parties. He husband eats half of his, then "when no one is looking" they swap plates "lightning fast" so it looks like Hasselbeck has eaten some of her food.

She notes that at a White House state dinner with Queen Elizabeth she was not seated next to her husband, foiling plate-swap plans. Instead "already on such a high from sitting at the same table with the First Lady, Prince Charles and Condoleezza Rice" she ate every bite on her plate. "My adrenalin completely eclipsed my tummy troubles on that once-in-a-lifetime evening," Hasselbeck concludes.

It's a good thing most of those who have celiac disease won't ever be put in that situation!

The weight loss chapter, "G Free and Slim as Can Be!" is grouped with the chapter on "The Autism Connection" in part three of the book, "More Great Reasons to Give up Gluten."

Hasselbeck writes that even if you do not have celiac disease, the G free diet is a terrific way to amp up your health regime. "You don't have to give up gluten altogether if you're primarily making this move to slim down," she says.

In another part of the book she writes, "You might be giving up gluten because you have been sick for a long time, and your recent diagnosis with celiac disease has come as a big relief. . . Or perhaps you simply want to lose a few pounds before swimming season."

Like many in the gluten-free community, I find the recommendation that a healthy person use the diet as a weight loss program hard to fathom. And it confuses the issue for both those who have celiac disease or gluten intolerance and the outside world they are trying to educate about the life-long need to remain completely gluten-free. One of the biggest worries we have about the way gluten-free has caught on recently is that it will be considered a fad diet—here today gone tomorrow as so many weight loss plans are.

"The gluten-free lifestyle is a lifelong commitment for the diagnosed celiac, not an option, not a fad diet—adhering to the GF lifestyle requires patience and persistence," the Celiac Disease Foundation said in a public statement about the book. "This lifestyle can not be trivialized."

The autism chapter is six pages, including resources. It's unlikely there is any new information here for the parents looking into the gluten-free diet as a possible treatment for their autistic children.

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Overall, "The G Free Diet" doesn't break new ground. Much of it is repeated old information, including some that's not totally correct. If you already own a book about celiac disease, you probably know most of what Hasselbeck tells you. It's also not a cookbook and includes only a few Italian recipes. If you are interested in Hasselbeck's celebrity viewpoint, it might be for you. And I can't deny the level of attention it brings to celiac disease.

But when I read it I could not help but think of some of the writers who have labored so long and so hard to help people on the gluten-free diet. As just one example, last year, Carol Fenster, formulated, tried and tested 1,000 recipes for her new gluten-free cookbook. I'm waiting for the day when Carol is interviewed on Access Hollywood.

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