GF foods from mushrooms to movie theater popcorn

By Amy Ratner

Q. Movie theater popcorn is one of my guilty pleasures. I have always assumed it is gluten free but wanted to know for sure. I hope I can continue to enjoy this treat when I go to the movies.

A. It's hard to resist the smell and taste of movie theater popcorn. The popcorn kernels themselves are, of course, gluten free. The oil and flavoring used to give them that unique movie taste were also gluten free in every case we checked.

All Flavacol brand popcorn, oil and butter flavoring produced by Gold Medal Products, a major supplier to movie theaters, is gluten free. Todd Sunderhaus, flavor technologist for Gold Medal, said the company's manufacturing facility is gluten free and that all ingredients are checked for allergens. When it comes to gluten, the company has a zero tolerance policy, Sunderhaus said.

Gold Medal does sell some products that contain wheat, including funnel cake and waffle cone mixes, but they are made by outside companies and stored in a separate room in the company's warehouse.

"All the popcorn is gluten free," Sunderhaus said. "There is no issue or question about that."

Several major movie theater chains also confirmed that their popcorn is gluten free. Regal Cinemas, the largest movie theater chain in the US, also sells popcorn with butter topping that is gluten free, according to marketing manager Richard Grover. Regal has 552 theaters in 39 states and Washington, D.C.

The butter topping at all 350 AMC theaters in 30 states and Washington is gluten free, according to Sun Dee Larson, director of external communications.

Likewise, the popcorn in all Cinemark theaters is gluten free, said James Meredith, vice president of marketing and communications. Cinemark has 289 theaters in 38 states.

If the economy has you planning to watch more movies at home, you'll be happy to know that most microwave popcorn is gluten free. Read the label to be sure.

If you really want to save money, you can buy regular popcorn kernels in a plastic bag for a fraction of the cost of prepackaged microwave popcorn.

You can use the kernels to make homemade microwave popcorn simply by putting a quarter cup of popcorn and salt or other seasoning to taste in a plain brown lunch bag. Add 1 teaspoon of olive or vegetable oil. Fold the top of the bag over and staple it twice (No, the staple will not ignite in the microwave. You can also fold the top of the bag over twice and skip the staples.) Gently shake the bag and lay it down in the microwave. Set the time from two to three minutes depending on your microwave, but stay there and remove the popcorn when there are three to five seconds between pops.

Some recipes for homemade microwave popcorn omit the oil, which would cut the fat content, but might also affect the taste.

You can also make popcorn the old-fashioned way. Pour just a bit of oil into the bottom of a pot, add some popcorn kernels, put the lid on the pot and turn the heat to medium high. Shake the pan when it starts popping or the popcorn will scorch and burn. Stay near the stove. Turn off the burner when there are three to five seconds between pops and leave the top on for a minute or two so the kernels settle.

If you are feeling a bit nostalgic try Jiffy Pop—it's gluten free. This is the brand that comes complete with oil and kernels already in an aluminum pan. I remember my parents making it on the stove when I was a kid and it seemed like sheer magic when the popcorn would bubble up into a big silver ball.

Q. I want to try to try new things on my gluten-free diet so I thought I might try hummus, but I don't really know what it is or what brands are gluten free. Can you tell me?

A. Hummus is a Middle Eastern spread made from mashed chickpeas, tahini, lemon juice and garlic. All ingredients are gluten free, including tahini, a paste made from ground sesame seeds.

Read the label on any packaged hummus and you will usually find it is gluten free. For example, Tribe, Fantastic Foods, Sabra and Athenos brands are gluten free. There are also numerous easy recipes for making homemade hummus, which is said to taste better than packaged products.

In general, the cracker or bread used to dip in hummus is a bigger problem for those who follow the gluten-free diet. At a party or in a restaurant, you will likely find hummus served with pita, flat Middle Eastern bread made with wheat. Once pita or another cracker or bread made from wheat is dipped in the hummus, it gets cross-contaminated.

But you can safely dip cut vegetables or gluten-free crackers in hummus to enjoy a safe and relatively healthy snack. If you take hummus to a party, bring something gluten-free to dip.

Q. I just read a newspaper story where a doctor said that ketchup and mustard could contain gluten. What ingredient in these condiments would contain gluten?

A. We saw that story too and were troubled by all the undue worry it would cause when we know ketchup and mustard are nearly always gluten free. Coleman's prepared mustard and Nance's honey mustard contain wheat flour, but that is rare.

Otherwise, the only thing we can think is that the doctor quoted in the story was depending on old information that put ketchup and mustard in the questionable category because they contain vinegar.

More than 10 years ago, we used our journalism training to investigate vinegar. We found that there was no good reason to think distilled vinegar might contain gluten. It was and always has been gluten free. We have repeated this information frequently but distilled vinegar continues to be questioned and unnecessarily avoided by some people who follow a gluten-free diet. Distilled vinegar is in a lot of products and worrying about it makes following the diet a lot harder than it needs to be.

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Basically ketchup is made from tomato paste or concentrate, corn syrup, distilled vinegar, salt and spices.

Most mustard is made from mustard seed, distilled vinegar, spices like turmeric, salt, paprika, and garlic, and natural flavor. Dijon mustard also contains white wine.

You might also wonder about mustard flour. It's the name for ground mustard seed and it does not contain wheat.

Q. My older daughter and I (both diagnosed 15 years ago) were watching a cooking show when we learned that mushrooms are grown from fungi which has been started on wheat grain. A grower from Kennett Square, PA, the largest mushroom-growing region in the US, said that their "spawn" was based on wheat grain. Is there anything to worry about?

A. We're not sure what show you saw, but this question was also raised by readers who saw an episode of "How It's Made," in which mushrooms were grown in mushroom mycelium put atop wheat berries.

Here's a basic explanation of how white mushrooms are grown, from the Mushroom Council:

Mushrooms grow from microscopic spores, not seeds. Spores are used to inoculate grains or seeds to produce a product called spawn (the mushroom farmer's equivalent of seed). Spawn is made by sterilizing a mixture of rye, wheat, millet or other grain plus water and chalk.

Mushrooms must get all their nutrients from organic matter in their growing medium, which is called compost and is scientifically formulated of materials such as straw, corn cobs, cotton seed and cocoa seed hulls, gypsum and nitrogen supplements. The compost is pasteurized and spawn is worked into the compost.

In two to three weeks, the compost becomes filled with the root structure of the mushroom, a network of lacy white filaments called mycelium. At that point, a layer of pasteurized peat moss is spread over the compost.

Eventually, tiny white protrusions form on the mycelium and push up through the peat moss. Eventually they become mushroom caps, which are actually the fruit of the plant, just as a tomato is the fruit of a tomato plant.

In addition to the Mushroom Council, we talked to experts at a spawn company, the Mushroom Research Center at Pennsylvania State University, and a Penn State food scientist who specializes in mushrooms. All agreed that it is highly unlikely that mushroom growing practices would result in mushrooms being cross-contaminated.

Although cross-contamination of mushrooms by gluten-containing grains in spawn has not been studied, researchers have looked into allergen contamination of mushrooms by peanuts and soy. One study concluded that supplements/fertilizers made from peanut and soy proteins introduced to the mushroom crop at the same time as the spawn did not cross-contaminate the mushrooms.

Editor's note: Dennis Weldon, of Weldon Flavorings, wrote to ask us to tell readers that his company's coffee flavorings, which are gluten free, are also free of sugar or artificial sweeteners. We mentioned them in On Your Plate, Vol. 4, 2008.

Send your questions to
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