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## Gluten-Free Baking Basics

Expert help for how to make  
gluten-free, holiday treats  
taste good



BY ELANA AMSTERDAM

*Back in 1997* when next to nobody had heard of the term “gluten free,” I found myself sick—so sick that I couldn’t get out of bed. Sure, I’d experienced the telltale fatigue, migraines, and anemia for years, but with the additional onset of serious gastrointestinal symptoms, my situation had become unbearable.

So when I was finally diagnosed with celiac disease—a hereditary, autoimmune disorder that makes it impossible for my body to process gluten—I was relieved to finally know what was wrong with me.

### RECIPES

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## healing foods

Things were going well until three years after my diagnosis, my oldest son—then a toddler—began exhibiting many of the same symptoms. His eventual diagnosis was upsetting. I was concerned he'd miss out on the social aspects of eating. Who doesn't enjoy breaking bread (or pizza) with their friends? And the holidays: He'd never get to have all those delicious cookies and pies. So I made it my mission to turn all of my favorite childhood recipes into high-protein, gluten-free classics—which turned out to be healthier for the family, too.

I spent the next couple of years immersing myself in research—reading, sampling, and cooking up a storm. I created literally hundreds of recipes and kept them all in a big black binder in my kitchen. To make the recipes more accessible to family and friends, I created a blog, [elanaspantry.com](http://elanaspantry.com), where I posted my newest creations. This culminated in a book, *The Gluten-Free Almond Flour Cookbook* (Celestial Arts, 2009). Another book, *Gluten-Free Cupcakes*, will be out next summer.

But my blog is where the day-to-day action is; it's my laboratory where I've made countless gluten-free discoveries and even a few mistakes. Read on for a sampling of what I've learned in the past 13 years living gluten-free and blogging about it. See also page 32 for recipes for gluten-free baked goods—both from my book and blog—that will help get you through the holidays.

### The Science Behind Celiac

So what is gluten? It's a protein found in wheat, rye, and barley that, when used in baking, holds together cakes and breads and gives them a nice, spongy texture. But it's also extremely toxic—in even the smallest amounts—for people with celiac disease.

In a person with celiac, gluten causes

an immune reaction that damages the lining of the small intestine. When the small intestine is compromised, it cannot properly absorb food, resulting in bloating, diarrhea, and weight loss. It also sets off reactions that reverberate throughout the body, explains celiac expert Peter Green, MD, director of the Celiac Disease Center at Columbia University and author of *Celiac Disease: A Hidden Epidemic* (William Morrow, 2006). "Celiac disease is not just a gastrointestinal disorder; it is a multi-system disease that can involve any organ in the body, such as the brain, skin, joints, liver, and bones, just to mention a few," says Green. Which is why conditions such as migraines, depression, and infertility can directly be attributed to celiac. (For a complete list of symptoms, see "The Symptoms of Celiac" at right.)

If left untreated, celiac disease can even lead to severe illness, says Robert Rountree, MD, a Boulder, Colorado-based integrative physician. He says osteoporosis, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, and even cancer can be tied to prolonged, untreated celiac disease. To that end, celiac is a serious disease that requires medical testing and ongoing follow-up with a physician.

### An Epidemic?

About 3 million people in the US have celiac disease (that's 1 in 133), according to *The Archives of Internal Medicine*. But only about 5 percent have received an actual diagnosis, says Alice Bast, President of the National Foundation for Celiac Awareness (NCCA).

If you suspect you might have celiac, take our list of symptoms and bring it to your naturopath or gastroenterologist. If you have enough indicative symptoms, you'll receive an antibody test, which is referred to as a "celiac panel." Bast emphasizes that it's important that

## The Symptoms of Celiac

Symptoms of celiac disease are highly variable and can manifest at any age, says Shelley Case, RD, a leading expert on celiac and author of *Gluten Free Diet: A Comprehensive Resource Guide* (Case Nutrition Consulting, 2010). Case says that some people may experience only a few symptoms, while others will experience many. These are the most common:

- » Gastrointestinal problems, including bloating, gas, diarrhea, abdominal pain, and/or constipation
- » Weight loss and malnutrition (though, celiac can also occur in obese individuals)
- » Mouth ulcers
- » Extreme fatigue
- » Bone and joint pain
- » Easy bruising of the skin
- » Reproductive problems, including menstrual irregularities, miscarriage, and infertility (in both men and women)
- » Migraines
- » Depression

testing be done while the patient is still eating gluten in order for the results to be accurate.

### Celiac Disease vs. Gluten Intolerance

But celiac disease isn't the only reason to try a gluten-free diet. People who have "gluten intolerance," also called Non-Celiac Gluten Sensitivity (NCGS), experience symptoms due to gluten intake, but don't test positive for the genes or antibodies. Gluten intolerance symptoms include moodiness, fatigue, and digestive distress. (My younger son was diagnosed with gluten intolerance). It's estimated that 1 in 7 people have NCGS.

According to Bast, if your doctor confirms that you don't have celiac—but

#### FREE STUFF!



Win a copy of Elana Amsterdam's book, *The Gluten-Free Almond Flour Cookbook*. Find out how at [naturalsolutionsmag.com](http://naturalsolutionsmag.com).

you still experience symptoms—you should experiment with the gluten-free diet. She recommends discussing an elimination diet with your doctor or dietician so that proper nutrition is maintained. “Some will notice an improvement within just days and for others it takes longer,” she says. In the end, only you can determine the amount of gluten your body can tolerate.

For those with celiac disease, however, the only cure is abiding by a 100-percent gluten-free diet. And, no, it's not as simple as avoiding bread. You have to be a meticulous reader of food labels and product ingredients. (Did you know there's gluten in salad dressing and tamari?) Which is why the gluten-free lifestyle turned me into a scratch cook; I'd rather make everything from scratch than take the risk.

### In Search of the Perfect Flour

I know now that flour is the key to great gluten-free baked goods—but it took me a while to learn this. I began my culinary journey with rice flour, which produced an odd, somewhat bitter, gummy taste and gritty texture. Next I tried bean, tapioca, and quinoa flours, which made my cookies crumbly and cakes super-dry.

Finally, after many years and numerous taste testers (trust me, kindergartners will spit out dessert if they don't like it), I found my favorite flours. And luckily, the most delicious flours were also the most nutritious—helping people with celiac re-nourish and recover health and vital energy.

When using these flours, I'm happy to let my boys have pie before dinner; little do they know the pie is full of antioxidants, protein, and fiber. For me, even though they're gluten-free, the holidays are now happy again.

**ALMOND FLOUR** is made from finely ground, blanched almonds. It's easy to buy online (I wouldn't advise trying to make your own), and it has a rich taste and buttery texture—no strange gritty bits and funky after-taste. It's super easy to use, high in protein, and rich in healthy mono-unsaturated fats. For some, almond flour can be just a bit heavy, so one trick I use is to add a tablespoon or two of arrowroot powder. This can lighten up a cake or bread recipe quite nicely. (Cocoa powder also works.) Almond flour is optimal for cookies as well as breading fish sticks, chicken fingers, and piccatas.

## Elana's Tips for Using Almond Flour

**STORAGE:** I store my almond flour (and other flours that are high in protein and good fats, such as those above) in large glass jars in the refrigerator. Stored this way, they'll last for several months. I also keep a small glass jar out on the counter (or in a kitchen cabinet), as these flours are best used at room temperature.

**BUYING:** Whatever you do, don't purchase almond flour in a retail location, as it is extremely overpriced, and often doesn't work in my recipes. I buy all of my almond flour online from the following vendors. The following meet my three criteria for good flour: high in quality, well priced, and very fresh.

**BENEFIT YOUR LIFE** (877.295.2407; benefityourlifestore.com)

**DIGESTIVE WELLNESS** (845.356.4557; digestivewellness.com)

**HONEYVILLE** (888.810.3212; store.honeyvillegrain.com)

**JK GOURMET** (800.608.0465; jkgourmet.com)

**NUTS ONLINE** (800.558.6887; nutsonline.com)

### MORE ONLINE!

For more gluten-free recipes and tips, go to [naturalsolutionsmag.com](http://naturalsolutionsmag.com) and type "Gluten-Free Made Easy."

**COCONUT FLOUR** is coconut meat that is finely ground after it has been dehydrated. Again, I would advise purchasing online, rather than attempting to make your own. Coconut flour is light and fluffy and full of fiber. Because of this it soaks up a ton of moisture and requires ratios of wet-to-dry that are extremely high (which makes some people think there are typos in my recipes). Coconut flour is best for cakes, muffins, and bread.

**CHIA FLOUR** is finely ground chia seeds. You can buy it at any health-food store or make your own in a high-speed blender. This flour is a superfood, high in protein and fiber. It is also one of the only vegetarian sources of omega-3s. I use chia flour in combination with almond or coconut flours to make deliciously nutty tasting, dense, European-style breads. It's also a good binder in baked goods.

**FLAX MEAL** is a nutritious powerhouse of compounds that are anti-inflammatory and prevent heart disease and lower cholesterol. When I want a recipe to have a nutty, "whole grain" type of flavor, I use flax meal. It's fabulous in breads, healthy tasting crusts, and "bran" muffins.

**ELENA'S NOTE:** Readers often ask if they can use their own recipes and substitute gluten-free flours for wheat flour, one-to-one. I wish it were that easy. There's a science to using these flours; I've been known to test a single recipe as many as 40 times before I get it right. So it's best to stick to gluten-free-specific recipes.

See recipes on page 32

Recipes from  
*The Gluten-Free Almond Flour Cookbook*



### Pecan Pie With Dark Chocolate Crust

SERVES 8

#### Filling

- 1½ cups water
- 2 tablespoons agar flakes
- ½ teaspoon sea salt
- 1½ cups agave nectar
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 3 cups whole pecans, toasted

#### Crust

- 1½ cups blanched almond flour
- ½ teaspoon sea salt
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- 2 tablespoons grapeseed oil
- 2 tablespoons agave nectar
- ½ cup chopped dark chocolate, melted over very low heat (optional)

1. For the filling, in a medium saucepan, boil water, add agar flakes, and cook over high heat, stirring frequently, until flakes dissolve, 10 to 12 minutes. Decrease heat and whisk in salt, agave nectar, vanilla, and cinnamon. Continue cooking over medium heat for 2 to 3 minutes, stirring frequently until all ingredients are well incorporated. Cool to room temperature, and stir in pecans. Set aside.
2. For crust, preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a large bowl, combine almond flour, salt, and baking soda. In a separate bowl, whisk together oil, agave nectar, and melted chocolate. Combine thoroughly with the almond flour mixture. Press dough into a 9½-inch pie pan. Bake for 8 to 12 minutes, until the crust's surface loses its sheen and starts to look dry—be careful not to overcook. Remove from oven and let cool completely.
3. Pour the pecan mixture into the cooled crust, and refrigerate for one hour, or until the pie has set. Serve.

## Chocolate Chip Scones

MAKES 16

- 2 ½ cups blanched almond flour
- ½ teaspoon sea salt
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ cup grapeseed oil
- ¼ cup agave nectar
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup coarsely chopped dark chocolate (73 percent cacao)

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line two large baking sheets with parchment paper.
2. In a large bowl, combine the almond flour, salt, and baking soda. In a medium bowl, whisk together the grapeseed oil, agave nectar, and eggs. Stir the wet ingredients into the almond-flour mixture until thoroughly combined, then fold in the chocolate.
3. Drop the batter—in scant, ¼ cups, 2-inches apart—onto the prepared baking sheets.
4. Bake for 12 to 17 minutes, until golden brown or a toothpick inserted into the center of a scone comes out clean. Let the scones cool for 30 minutes on the baking sheets. Serve cold or warm.

## Vegan Eggnog

SERVES 6

- 3 cups almonds
- 4 cups water
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 2 tablespoons agave nectar
- 2 tablespoons yacón syrup
- 2 teaspoons ground nutmeg, plus a pinch for garnish
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- Pinch ground cloves

1. Place almonds in a large bowl with enough water to cover. Soak overnight.
2. Discard soaking water, and rinse almonds in a strainer or bowl repeatedly until water is clear.
3. Place almonds and 4 cups water in a food processor and blend on high speed for 90 seconds.
4. Strain through a fine mesh bag or cheesecloth, discard solids.
5. Place liquid almond milk in a ½-gallon mason jar; add vanilla, agave, yacón, nutmeg, cinnamon, and cloves. Shake well. Refrigerate until cold and serve with additional nutmeg for garnish.



## Double Chocolate Cherry Cookies

MAKES 24

- 2 ¾ cups blanched almond flour
- ½ teaspoon sea salt
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ¼ cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- ½ cup grapeseed oil
- ¾ cup agave nectar
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 1 cup coarsely chopped dark chocolate (73 percent cacao)
- 1 cup dried, fruit-juice-sweetened cherries

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line 2 large baking sheets with parchment paper.
2. In a large bowl, combine the almond flour, salt, baking soda, and cocoa powder. In a medium bowl, whisk together the grapeseed oil, agave nectar, and vanilla extract.
3. Fold the wet ingredients into the almond-flour mixture until thoroughly combined. Fold in the chocolate and cherries.
4. Spoon the dough, 1 heaping tablespoon at a time, onto the prepared baking sheets, leaving 2 inches between each cookie.
5. Bake for 10 to 15 minutes, until the tops of the cookies dry and start to crack—be careful not to overcook. Let the cookies cool on baking sheets for 20 minutes, then serve warm. ■

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