

Gluten-free advocate Longtime blogger, Dunedin resident to launch magazine

By JULIANA A. TORRES

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DUNEDIN – Carol Kicinski is serious about good food.

The gluten-free blogger, TV chef, cookbook writer, professional recipe developer, food photographer and general force behind the Simply Gluten Free franchise will begin publishing a magazine written by best voices in the allergen-free blog and medical community.

“It’s actually a bit revolutionary,” Carol said. “It’s a magazine for people with food sensitivities, by people with food sensitivities.”

But the Simply Gluten Free magazine, officially announced Aug. 8, is only the latest dauntless venture for the Dunedin resident who said she was at first resistant to changing her “very gluten-filled” diet.

“I didn’t go right into the healthy light. I had to be dragged a little bit. It was quite a change for me,” she explained. “I lived off of bagels and pasta.”

Carol was diagnosed with what was then called a wheat allergy more than 20 years ago.

“I was really exhausted, and I was having bad migraine headaches,” she remembered.

Her doctor advised her to stay away from wheat, which Carol did – for a time, mistakenly assuming that altering her diet for six weeks would cure her. Adapting a new lifestyle, especially with a husband and two boys who “weren’t going to eat weird food” was more of a challenge, she said.

“There weren’t a lot of cookbooks and there weren’t a lot of people talking about gluten free, so I just had to kind of figure it out,” Carol said. “The gluten-free stuff you could buy was horrible.”

So she started simple: salads, grilled meats and lots of vegetables. Luckily, the San Francisco Bay area where she lived was at the cusp of a cuisine shift that included a move away from flour-based sauces, for example.

“I would see what those chefs were doing and kind of try to do that at home, so my food felt special, but it was still simple,” Carol said. “Reduce a little vinegar, drizzle it over your grilled chicken, and it seems fancy all of a sudden.”

She decided to use grilled eggplant or zucchini in place of pasta layers in lasagna. She read cookbooks “like most people read novels,” she said, but usually always added her own twist to recipes.



Photo by JULIANA A. TORRES

Food blogger and TV chef Carol Kicinski displays a mockup of her latest venture, Simply Gluten Free magazine, in downtown Dunedin Aug. 24. The first issue of the magazine, written by experts living various food allergen-free lifestyles, is set to debut in November.

Her family, and sometimes her husband's business associates, was treated to a wide range of foods, often made for the first time, her husband Thom said.

"All these years, raising two boys ... I can count on my hands the times she's cooked the same meal twice," he said. "She just never did. It was always different."

Carol said she has never been afraid to experiment in the kitchen.

"Unless the food is literally rotten, it's not going to kill you. The worse that could happen is you wasted a little time and ingredients," she said.

She's so fascinated by food, that she said she comes back from trips from Rome with photographs of "a beautiful cappuccino," market places, artichokes, red peppers and "practically every meal I ever ate," instead of shots of the Coliseum.

The Kicinskis moved to Dunedin in 1999, Carol leaving behind a "kind of boring" job as a financial controller for a multimillion-dollar company. She didn't envision herself as an eventual advocate for gluten-free living.

Her blog, started in November 2007, began as a personal challenge to improve her own recipe and photography dabbling. It's grown to one of the top gluten-free websites, with 600,000 page views and 80,000 unique visitors per month.

"I didn't by any stretch of the imagination think that as many people would read it as they do. That was kind of a surprise," she said.

She discovered a welcoming community, and joked that she was the "new housewife on the virtual Wisteria Lane."

"I noticed that every day, I started to look more and more forward to what I was doing on my blog," she said.

Her readership grew until late 2009, when in a two-week period, three different publishing companies, interested in publishing her cookbook, contacted her.

"I hadn't thought of it before," Carol admitted.

Since that time, she's published two cookbooks – "Simply Gluten-free Desserts" in 2011 and "Simply Gluten-free Quick Meals" in 2012. She also became a professional recipe developer, coming up with recipes using coconut palm sugar made by Wholesome Sweeteners, San-J gluten-free soy sauces and products from the largest North American gluten-free company, Kinnikinnick.

Driven by the poor choices available, Carol set out to develop her own gluten-free flour without the grittiness and "cardboard" flavor prevalent in other products. For months, she researched the properties of flour and experimented to come up with just the right combination of rice flours and starches to re-create the gummy stickiness that gluten provides. A Le Cordon Bleu-trained chef stayed with the Kicinskis for two weeks while he replaced typical flour with "Carol's All-Purpose Pastry Flour," cup for cup, in a marathon of recipes. It passed every test, Carol said.

In 2010, Carol began a monthly contributor to the nationally syndicated NBC show Daytime TV, the first gluten-free chef. She also united the hundreds of voices in her blogging community under the banner "Gluten Free Global Community."

"The world's changed since 2007. People go to blogs now for so much more information," Carol said. "It seemed to be a little more recreational before and now, they're resources."

Carol is now drawing upon that community, more than 20 of the top allergen-free food bloggers, for her new magazine venture.

"It's a collection of voices ... a collective group of doctors and bloggers who are every day living their gluten and allergen free lives," she explained.

While the magazine certainly will include recipes, it's more about promoting a lifestyle for those who are gluten-free, sugar-free, dairy-free or follow even a vegan or Paleolithic diet. It will include medical information from doctors who also live gluten-free lives and tackle issues like traveling and eating out safely, entertaining gluten-free and keeping even beauty and cleaning supplies free of allergens.

"I'm hoping that it's really informative and that the person reading the magazine will be educated and entertained at the same time. And it's going to be pretty," said Carol, who is design editor of the publication. "It's very important for me to produce a magazine that I personally would want to buy and keep."

The first November-December issue of the bi-monthly magazine will be released soon. The response, both from the public and the advertisers has been amazing, said Thom, who's acting as executive publisher.

"The subscriptions are pouring in," he said.

That's understandable, given that the writers of the blogs are bringing not only their own experiences, but their established readership, which amounts to a combined 4.95 million page views a month, more than 650,000 unique visitors per month and more than 125,000 Facebook followers, Thom said.

"It's an idea whose time has come," Carol said.

For Carol, living gluten-free took a shift in perspective. She said she had to stop looking at the food she couldn't eat and focus on what she could still enjoy, which thankfully includes coffee and chocolate.

"I realized that I can control my own health and wellbeing by what I choose to eat and not eat," she added. "Do I want to feel good or do I want to feel bad? It all depends on whether I have a bagel or not ... In essence, that's what it is."

Now, aside from the occasional instances in restaurants where she's "accidentally glutenized," she's been successfully avoiding gluten for many years.

"There is not one iota of desire for me to cheat," she said. "I don't think everybody would look at a whole pile of poison and think, 'oh I wish I could have it.'"

“It’s a little bit more complex, but in essence that’s what it is.”

Visit the eventual home of the new magazine, www.simplyglutenfreemag.com, for subscription information. Carol’s blog is at simplygluten-free.com.

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