

TO GLUTEN OR NOT TO GLUTEN

According to a recent Mintel study, Gluten-Free is one of the fastest growing product areas in North America. People who have adopted gluten-free diets claim the benefits include weight loss, less bloating, better skin and an overall improvement in their feeling of everyday health. Products that contain high levels of gluten are foods such as bread, pasta, cakes, cookies, basically anything made with flour. Sound familiar? Seems to me this is another version of low carb, and we all know what happened to that don't we?

For those of you who read my blog on trend vs fad in August, this is a great example of fad. However, I expect this fad will last a little longer and won't be quite as extreme as Low Carb was in its day. Why you ask? According to the Centre for Celiac Research, approximately 6% of the American population (assuming the percentage is roughly the same in Canada), or 18 million people have a gluten intolerance or sensitivity. Is it possible that these 18 million people generated over \$180 million in sales in 2011 in just four product categories (bread and baked goods, salty snacks, cookies and snack bars, and crackers and crispbreads) a growth of over 60% compared to the previous year (*source: Mintel*)? Gluten Free products are going beyond people who have a real intolerance and being adopted by people who are choosing to forego gluten because of many of the other claimed benefits, especially weight loss.

Why do I think it's a fad that will last longer than low carb? Well the change in diet is less extreme and with an increasing number of new products assisting in the change in diet it makes it less restrictive. This will enable people to stick to it a little longer. The reality is without the gluten the taste and texture of products will not be the same, not as good in most cases. At some point we will tire of the less tasty options and want to return to the regular.

Because it is not highly restrictive, in that you don't have to cut out any one food completely plus there are lots of alternatives, it will pique the interest of a wider group of people and gluten free dieting will have a wider trial group than other diet fads. Gluten Free products will have good trial, but like all new products only the best will survive.

Where the trend falls short, resulting in a fad, is its support and sustainability. There is really no medical support to suggest this is a better way to live. In fact there are studies that show it can cause problems in the long term by messing up the balance of amino acids in your system and ultimately causing heart problems. So the negative side effects won't be immediate and obvious as it was with low carb – lack of energy, and just plain difficult to stick to.

My prediction is that in the short term there will be an increase in demand for gluten free products and real success. The best of the products will survive and the weak will disappear. However, overall gluten free won't last. People will follow human nature and want to go back to eating what they really want without any sacrifices. So in the long term, we will be left with the approximately 6% of the population who truly need gluten free products. This is not exactly a recipe for mainstream success. In the end the result will be a heightened awareness of gluten and a selectiveness of where gluten free will continue to exist. The consumer will become more educated on different types of gluten free grains that will be brought into the mainstream.



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