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New San Carlos shop bakes up wheat-free goodies

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The raspberry vanilla bread at Zest Bakery could easily look at home inside any bakery's display case. But this is no ordinary sweet treat.

Like all goods at the newly opened downtown San Carlos bakery, the loaf is entirely free of gluten, a wheat substance that can sicken people with wheat allergies — a condition known as celiac disease.

It's the first all-gluten-free bakery on the Peninsula, owner Patrick Luke says, adding he's convinced there's pent-up demand for his specialty goods.

Since the bakery's grand-opening on Friday, Luke has been baking three dozen baguettes and bread loaves daily, which usually sell out by 11 a.m. He can't keep his gluten-free ravioli in stock, either.

"The response from the community has been absolutely amazing," Luke said in an interview this week, bleary-eyed from waking up at 4 a.m. and working 18-hour days. "I could not ask for a better reception."

Luke, 36, and his fiancée, shop co-manager Charissa Fleischer, 26, are planning to hire a few

more employees to keep up with the steady stream of customers.

Luke didn't take the traditional route to owning a specialties bakery. He worked in information technology for 17 years and had never operated a commercial kitchen.

But he was inspired by his own experience with celiac disease, a digestive disorder that causes an immune reaction in the small intestine when gluten is eaten. A 2003 study estimated celiac disease affects

1.5 million Americans, though it often goes undiagnosed.

Plagued by constant upset stomachs and intense heartburn, Luke realized three years ago he might be a celiac. So he stopped eating foods containing gluten — most breads, pastas, muffins and pastries — and has felt fine ever since, though he's never been tested for the disease.

After his self-diagnosis, Luke started cooking and baking gluten-free food for himself and his friends. After getting laid off from an IT job in September he and Fleischer decided to try their hand at baking full-time and leased the former Harmony Frozen Yogurt storefront on Arroyo Avenue, just off the main Laurel Street drag in downtown San Carlos.

They thought about renting commercial kitchen space before getting their own shop, but potential contamination from equipment used to bake wheat products proved to be a "massive issue," Luke said.

"At that point, we decided we were going to just jump off the deep end and look for a space," Luke said.

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Zest Bakery's opening has created a buzz on online message boards among Bay Area celiacs, said Vic Dolcourt, a Sunnyvale resident and leader of a support group for celiacs in the South Bay and on the Peninsula.

Dolcourt, 67, said gluten-free products have become more common at stores like Whole Foods since he was diagnosed eight years ago, though he describes the wheat-free bread in stores as "universally terrible."

"It's hard and tasteless, you wouldn't want to eat it," Dolcourt said. "I'm looking forward to going up the Peninsula and checking out that bakery because that's pretty exciting."

Zest uses organic and locally produced ingredients whenever possible and gets nearly all its fruit from the farmers markets in Belmont and San Carlos. Luke also uses alternatives to wheat flour, such as brown rice flour, quinoa flour, tapioca and potato starch.

Luke hopes to set the bakery apart by offering gluten-free breads, pastas and pizza, which he said aren't often available on the Peninsula. Many of the gluten-free products in grocery stores are cookies and sweet breads, he said, adding that "there's only so many sweets a person can have."

That's welcome news for Colleen McGuire, 39, a San Carlos resident whose six-year-old daughter was diagnosed with celiac disease five years ago.

McGuire said finding gluten-free food when eating out is a constant challenge. She is excited about having a local source of baked goods that she knows are safe for her celiac daughter, Catherine, and her other two children, who don't have the

disease.

"We just walked there this morning before I took them to camp and they got breakfast," McGuire said Wednesday. "I don't have to worry about what she's eating or that it'll be contaminated."

Zest also offers gluten-free mini-cheesecakes thanks to a partnership with Luke's future sister-in-law, Cynthia Fleischer, 24, who runs the Anticupcake Company cheesecake business in Menlo Park.

"The crust Patrick makes here is just delicious," Cynthia Fleischer said.

Though he bakes with some butter and milk, Luke is exploring almond milk and butter alternatives to accommodate the lactose-intolerant and vegan crowds. He's also gotten calls from local churches about making gluten-free communion bread. Despite the emphasis on gluten-free, Luke hopes his bakery also will appeal to those who can eat wheat, like Myra Flores, 37, who lives down the street and stopped in for a sample Tuesday.

"Most neighborhoods don't have a good bakery," said Flores, 37. "How nice is that?"

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GLUTEN-FREE GOODS

A sampling of some items on the menu at Zest Bakery this week:

- Baguettes
- White sandwich bread loaf
- Lemon zest poppy seed loaf with almond milk icing
- Sugar cookies with mission figs

For more information, visit www.zestbakery.com

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