**Cooking for Your Celiac**

By: Stephanie Van Dewark

I. Love. Food. Cakes, cookies, bread, pasta, stringy cheese, crisp salads, meat rolled in bread crumbs and gently toasted…mmm, all tasty delights. But all that changed when I started dating a celiac. (Dun, dun, daaah!) Gone were my romantic dreams of *Lady and the Tramp* recreations. All of the sudden, I learned how to read the nutrition labels. Yeah. Those little white labels on the side of the box? Turns out those aren’t for decoration! Like any good college student, I preferred to be ignorant of exactly what was in my frozen dinner, but now I had to actually read the gibberish they put on the sides of these things! The world was suddenly filled with limitations that I never previously considered, and did not completely understand either. However, you can’t choose your diseases, so I decided to take it as a challenge. Reluctantly, I put my favorite cookies back on the shelf and geared up for change.

First step to eating with a celiac: get creative. Use limitations as your guide, not the obstacle. Assembling a meal, like building a relationship, is about meeting in the middle. So you can’t use bread crumbs? Find alternatives. Potatoes as flour? Sure! Why not? Ultimately it’s about balancing the chemistry of the meal, and with just the right combination of time, spice, and smiles, something delicious may be the end result. Even if the meal is a flop, at least you can say you tried…and then eat more salad, which is probably better for you any ways.

Second rule: try new things. I know the products I like, heck, I even know the exact configuration in which they fit into my fridge. We humans like the familiar because it is comfortable. The familiar fits in the configuration of our lives in the same way cereal fits right beside crackers on the pantry shelf. We fear the failure (or bad taste, both are equally uncomfortable) of introducing new things into the mix, but sometimes it’s worth it. You may just discover a magical combination of yams and cheese that makes your mother finally believe you can cook, but if not, even failures help us to make connections. You’d be surprised how many neighbors you can meet by almost burning down the apartment.

Third rule: stay positive. So the consistency is dirt, but hot sauce usually covers up most cooking faux pas. Besides, any food critic will tell you that it’s the subtle tastes that make a true delicacy, so take time to appreciate the little things. The smell of melted cheese, the smile of someone with a milk mustache, successfully cutting a pie in equal portions. Heck, even the clutter of dishes in the sink can be a sign that you are in good company. There are a thousand small events to celebrate, even if they didn’t have the proper graham cracker alternative available at the store.

Final rule: taste has more to do with the people you are with than the ingredient label. Ok, so you’ve tackled the challenge, manipulated the variables, tried out the weird brands with the inexcusably high prices, and the result still falls short of the deliciousness of French bread and a fondue. Remember, shared laughter improves even the nastiest meals. There are kinks to every experience, whether it be cooking for your celiac, or just dealing with the challenges of life. Ultimately, a tight hug or a soft spoken encouragement is the recipe for getting through the day. The people around to hear your “good morning” and “goodnight” will mean more to you than what you ate that day.

(Side Note: Despite your best efforts, poisoning your celiac may be a possible side effect of these steps. There are few feelings worse than unintentionally causing harm to the people you care about. Luckily the people that matter forgive you, so remember to forgive yourself as well.)