

## **Kids with allergy taste the good stuff**

By Sophia Kazmi

STAFF WRITER  
Contra Costa Times

[Article Launched:08/27/2007 03:04:09 AM PDT](#)

LIVERMORE -- Most children don't attend summer camp for the food. But for the children at Camp Arroyo, the special menu was a highlight of their four-day August camp.

At dinner, about 80 campers and counselors devoured cheesy dinner rolls, Caesar salad with croutons, spaghetti and brownies. Nothing unusual on the surface, but for children who have Celiac disease, those are off limits unless prepared without a key ingredient -- wheat flour.

"They have a lot of food here ... more than I can possibly eat," said 14-year-old Blake Pepper-Tunick of Rohnert Park. "There is anything that anyone would possibly eat. You don't have to ask if something is gluten-free."

People with Celiac disease are allergic to gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley and rye. Their bodies attack gluten as a harmful foreign substance. The reaction damages the small intestine, where many of the nutrients from food are absorbed. If left untreated, the small intestine may be damaged to the point where it can no longer absorb essential nutrients, leading to serious health problems in the long run.

The only treatment for the disease, which can be diagnosed at any age, is a gluten-free diet. That can be tricky, when so many foods contain flour or malt or are cooked on surfaces where glutinous foods are cooked. Typically, most baked goods, pastas, desserts and processed foods contain gluten, as do some medications.

Gluten-free foods cannot come in contact with gluten-containing foods. Anything used to prepare gluten-free foods has to be thoroughly cleaned. This makes the notion of eating out difficult -- and attending a residential summer camp nearly impossible.

"The thing is, we can get all of this stuff but not outside of our homes," said camp counselor Amy Bhatnagar of Sunnyvale.

Elaine Taylor, president and founder of the Taylor Family Foundation, which hosts several free camps throughout the summer for children who have health conditions, understands what these children deal with. Taylor was diagnosed with Celiac disease seven years ago and understands the difficulty of living with it. She really wanted the campers to have a good time and eat well. Cooking gluten-free food was one

challenge, but making it taste good was another.

But the children loved the results at camp.

"So my attitude was, 'Let's make sure that they have the best food, the greatest food out there,'" Taylor said, "although that's a big word in the Celiac community: 'great' food."

For some children it was the first time they had a hamburger bun or enjoyed a brownie sundae without worrying about getting sick.

"It's like being a real normal kid, just go up and get food," said Sammi Sylvester, 14, of Danville.

To prepare the kitchen for four days of gluten-free meals, camp cooks cleaned the entire industrial kitchen and double-cleaned the ovens to make sure no specks of gluten-containing products were left.

Children did all the normal camp activities -- hiking, swimming and sitting around a camp fire, where they made s'mores with graham crackers that were made without graham flour, which has gluten in it. They spent the day at Lake Del Valle, but mostly everyone talked about the food. They also talked to each other a lot. For many of these campers, it was the first time they met other children who have Celiac disease.

"It's pretty cool because there are all these kids who have the same thing that I have, and we talk about a little bit about what's tough and what really hard about it and what we do to take care of it," Pepper-Tunick said.

Reach Sophia Kazmi at [skazmi@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:skazmi@bayareanewsgroup.com) or 925-847-2122.

## Celiac Disease

Celiac disease is an autoimmune condition that requires a lifelong gluten-free diet. Gluten is found in wheat, barley and rye but can also be found in processed foods and soy sauce.

About one in 130 people have the disease, which is under-diagnosed. Long-term effects, if undiagnosed, include anemia, osteoporosis, infertility and certain cancers.

Immediate symptoms include diarrhea, vomiting, cramps and bloating. The disease can start at any age in life and tends to be genetic.

## Online

For a multimedia presentation about the Summer Camp for Celiac Kids, visit <http://www.contracostatimes.com/>.