

BOREHAMWOOD & ELSTREE  
**TIMES**

Family firm is well-bread

Imagine being in a restaurant, scanning the menu and not seeing anything you like.

This is a common experience, but imagine if you could not have any of the food because you faced the risk of severe abdominal pains, headaches and diarrhoea.

This is the dilemma faced by thousands of people across the country who have a gluten intolerance called coeliac disease (pronounced see-liac).

Coeliac Awareness Week started on Monday and aims to raise the food industry's interest in making life easier for the one in every 100 people in the UK who suffer from this health problem.

The disease is a condition in which a protein, called gluten, damages the small intestine and impairs the absorption of food. Gluten is found in wheat, barley, rye and oats. The small intestine recovers and returns to normal when gluten is withdrawn from the diet.

Elstree has been the home of food manufacturer Gluten Free Foods since 1994. It delivers intolerance-friendly products to more than 30 countries worldwide.

Chairman Richard Ward started the family-run business after his children, Janine, now 39, and Ellis, now 36, were both diagnosed with coeliac disease at the age of six months.

Mr Ward is one of the founders of Coeliac UK society, which celebrates its 40th anniversary this autumn.

He said: "When the doctors at Great Ormond Street Hospital diagnosed Janine's condition they said she had a food intolerance and gave us a list of things that she could not eat.

"When I asked them what she could eat, they shrugged their shoulders."

There was a lack of ingredient information on food packaging at the time, so Mr Ward decided to take matters into his own hands.

He was a baker by profession and ran a delicatessen in Stanmore, north London, so decided to try making gluten-free products himself.

"The first thing I tried to make was bread, which when it came out of the oven looked like pitta," he said. "Now we have a range of 110 different products that we export around the world and to supermarkets and health food stores."

After his first attempt at making bread, Mr Ward perfected the technique and started a mail-order food delivery service in 1973. Five years later he opened the first gluten-free bakery.

He said: "I spent more than 20 years educating medical professionals about gluten-free and wheat-free food.

"Many doctors used to believe that coeliac disease was a childhood problem and that the sufferers would grow out of it in puberty, but that is not the case - coeliac disease can affect anybody of any age.

"My children were the world's most spoilt children with coeliac disease because they had a whole bakery to help with their condition. The problems that they faced were more significant when they were growing up.

"Wherever they went, including parties, they had to take pots with their own gluten-free food. I'm sure at times this was difficult and embarrassing for them in social situations."

Ellis is now the firm's sales and marketing director.

He said: "As I have grown up with this condition I have never known any different, but it was certainly difficult at times. Me and my sister always had a packed lunch going to school and so always felt a bit different.

"The kids in school would have apple crumble given to them at lunch and I would have to have chocolate rice crispies that were made for me. I remember going to the pub after college and worrying about drinking beer or lager because if I did I would be doubled up with stomach cramps later."

Research carried out by the Health Economics Research Centre, at the University of Oxford, has shown that 67 per cent of people with coeliac disease are less likely to eat out and 77 per cent are afraid to eat canteen food at their workplace.

Ellis added: "Times have changed and almost one in five people have a food intolerance in the UK. I live in Mill Hill and when I visit Pizza Express there I take a gluten-free pizza base with me and the restaurant are absolutely fine to use it.

"It's about educating people and making sure that gluten-free food is available not just in supermarkets, but restaurants, airlines, hotels and hospital menus everywhere."

2:49pm Tuesday 13th May 2008

*By Suruchi Sharma*