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Happy Thanksgiving... but what's in the gravy?

Written by [Bill Bittar](#)

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Loretta Jay and her husband Arkadiy Stepanskiy's two children Mickey, left, and Ellie have celiac and food allergies. □ (Photo by Bill Bittar)

This Thanksgiving a growing number of families will be checking for additives in their turkeys and the ingredients in the stuffing, gravy and cranberry sauce to ensure there are no allergens that could make some dinner guests sick.

Among them, Danielle and Adam Weisblatt of Fairfield will be sure to use substitutions for eggs, milk and nuts, so their son Jacob, 7, who is allergic to those foods, has a safe holiday meal.

“Our philosophy is everyone has their own thing,” Danielle Weisblatt said. “You learn to live with food allergies.”

Jacob was diagnosed with food allergies at eight months old.

“He always had skin irritation,” Weisblatt said. “One night on New Years Eve, we bought Middle Eastern food with Tahini, and his lips swelled.”

Both of fellow Fairfield mother Loretta Jay's children have food allergies to corn and rice.

“My daughter had a poultry allergy and had to have lobster; now she can have turkey, and she's excited,” Jay said.

The cranberry sauce Jay's family eats will have to be homemade, because the store-bought sauce contains corn syrup

About 1.5% of adults and up to 6% of children younger than 3 in the United States — about 4 million people — have a true food allergy, according to the FDA.

“The prevalence of food allergies is growing and probably will continue to grow along with all allergic diseases,” said Robert A. Wood, M.D., director of the pediatric allergy clinic at Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions in Baltimore.

In an “FDA Consumer” magazine article, Wood said research over the last three decades indicates that the number of people with allergies is skyrocketing in developed and developing countries but not in underdeveloped areas.

Cafeteria food

Weisblatt said Jacob's teachers at North Stratfield Elementary School are very accommodating about her son's food allergies.

“We take it very seriously, and it really helps us if parents let us know as soon as they know their child has a food allergy,” School Supt. Ann Clark said of the Fairfield Public School System.

Clark said the Board of Education has a general policy for all food in the cafeteria and that individual schools have their own policies for parties.

Joan Fitzpatrick is the school district's manager of food and nutrition services. Twenty-two of Fitzpatrick's 29 years as a food services director have been in Fairfield.

“Probably in the last five to seven years I noticed a spike,” she said of food allergies.

The most common food allergies are peanuts and tree nuts, milk, eggs, shellfish, wheat and soy, according to Fitzpatrick.

“Fairfield is pretty much on the cutting edge for school districts,” she said. “Fifteen years ago we started to deal with peanut and nut allergies.”

Fitzpatrick said school cafeterias try to be as nut-free as possible. The Board of Education's policy on food allergies requires cafeterias to have allergy-free tables that are cleaned regularly.

She said each student has an account at the cafeteria and when they pay for their lunch a food allergy alert pops up on the screen, so a cafeteria worker can look at their tray to make sure everything is okay.

Communication is a key component of school policies as parents notify schools of their child's allergy, and parents receive detailed information of what's in school lunches. If teachers or children come into contact with a food some children may be allergic to, they wash their hands.

School administrations set up an emergency plan with the nursing staff and the bus company in the event of a bad allergic reaction, such as when a child has difficulty breathing.

On class trips, parents receive a menu of what the children will eat, and if they are still unsure whether it will be safe, they send their child with their own food. Students with severe allergies must bring an Epinephrine with them.

Teachers are even careful with the fruit and vegetables used in science and art classes.

Taking it on

Jay's home-based company, Parasol, LLC, provided parenting programs but its mission changed six years ago, when Jay and both of her children — Mickey and Ellie — were diagnosed with celiac disease.

Though celiac requires food restrictions just as her children's food allergies do, the autoimmune disorder is not considered a food allergy. Parasol, LLC, now educates schools and families about celiac and other food disorders.

"I will admit I did not know about food allergies and food restrictions before it affected our family," Jay said Friday. "In the beginning it was overwhelming, but it was manageable with information."

Celiac disease is triggered by consuming a protein called gluten, which is found in wheat, barley and rye. When a person with celiac eats gluten, the protein interferes with the absorption of nutrients from food by damaging a part of the small intestine called villi. Damaged villi make it nearly impossible for the body to absorb nutrients into the bloodstream, leading to malnourishment and a host of other problems including some cancers, osteoporosis, infertility, diabetes, and the onset of other autoimmune diseases.



"Celiac is the most common genetic disease," Jay said. "One percent of the U.S. population has it. Ninety-five percent are misdiagnosed or undiagnosed because physicians were taught it is a rare disorder."

"Celiac is not a bad thing to have," Jay said. "It is controlled by diet. There is no medication."

In addition to sticking to a gluten-free diet, Jay does not want children with celiac to feel like outcasts at parties when other children are eating things they cannot have, or when they have to bring their own food to a barbecue.

"My goal is to help others recognize the need to promote emotional health," she said.

Parasol provides support to families and training for non-profits and for schools in handling food restrictions in an educational setting. It also writes grant applications.

Calculated risks

Danielle Weisblatt with her son Jacob, 7. Jacob is allergic to eggs, milk and nuts.

On Monday evening, Jacob played the board game Chutes and Ladders with his twin brothers Ethan and Jordan, both 5. Though Jacob has few restrictions, he said it is sometimes hard when his brothers can eat French fries, and when his Cub Scout Troop carved jack-o-lanterns and baked the seeds and he couldn't eat them.

Weisblatt stocks her kitchen with egg substitutes and milk free products. She always reads food labels and said it's a good rule of thumb for parents of children with food allergies to even read labels of foods they always buy because companies sometimes change the ingredients.

"I bake cupcakes, put them in my freezer and pop it out for Jacob when he goes to a birthday party," she said. "Or I'll bake a cake, freeze it and send him with a slice. He feels good about it."

When Jacob is offered food at a friend's house, his parents tell him to politely decline it when he's not sure if he can eat it.

"Frankly it's easier to send him on play dates with a snack," Weisblatt said. "It's easier for everybody."

Both Jay' family and the Weisblatts shop at Trader Joes and Mrs. Green's Market and supermarkets now have sections for people with food allergies. When going out to eat, both women said restaurants will often prepare something for their children if they tell the chef about their restrictions. Weisblatt said sometimes restraunts heat something up something up that she brings from home for Jacob.

Unless Jacob outgrows his food allergies, they will always be a part of him, but Weisblatt said it should never define her son. Just because Jacob cannot have every snack, that doesn't mean the sweets aren't good.

When Weisblatt takes Jacob out for ices at the ice cream shop, she asks the employee to clean off the scooper and to skim the top off of the ice her son wants first so there is no cross contamination.

"I'm the parent, and I'm taking a calculated risk," Weisblatt said. "I want to let him have that little pleasure. I should be able to go up to him and say, 'Hey Jacob, let's go to Sunnie Days and get some ices.'"