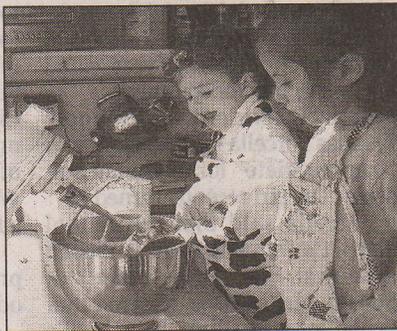




FORUM



Loretta Jay photo

Loretta Jay's children, Ellie and Mickey Stepanskiy, make sandwich rolls from a Bette Hagman recipe.

Sad goodbye to gluten-free gourmet

I never met Bette Hagman. Nonetheless, I mourn her death Aug. 17 in Seattle. She made a significant impact on my ability to give my children choices, to let them fit in with their friends.

Hagman was a pioneer. Because of her, my kids eat pretzels, bagels, pancakes, pizza, muffins and more. It may not sound like much, but for those of us with celiac disease and some food allergies, it is a lot.

People with celiac disease cannot digest gluten, the protein in wheat, barley, rye and some oats. When Hagman, also known as "the gluten-free gourmet," made her mark 25 years ago, physicians thought celiac disease was an orphan disease, affecting only a small number of people. In 2003, researchers determined that celiac disease is the most common genetic disease, affecting one of every 133 people.

Hagman led the way, helping celiacs with the one challenge they all faced together: food. She was author of six cookbooks, all detailing recipes without gluten. This was not easy, as gluten is the stuff that gives strength and structure to bread and elasticity and texture to many other foods.

Almost all celiacs, 97 percent, don't know that they have this autoimmune disorder. They continue to be treated, or not, for ailments like migraines, infertility, chronic fatigue, constipation or diarrhea, developmental delays, ataxia or seizure disorders.



LORETTA JAY

Although celiacs are identified in greater numbers today, there is a long road ahead. That road will be easier to manage for the newly diagnosed because of Hagman's contribution.

She spoke to Connecticut celiacs and parents of celiacs in 1996, at an early meeting of the Greater New Haven Celiac Group. She offered words of encouragement and wisdom at a time when celiacs were quite isolated. Since then, the group has grown from 15 members to over 350 families, the largest celiac group in the state.

Ill for most of her first 50 years with anemia, bone loss and gastrointestinal problems, doctors were at a loss and referred her to psychiatrists.

In 1974, Hagman was finally diagnosed. Told that she had a very rare condition that forbade eating common ingredients included in bread, pasta, cakes and most processed foods, she set out to create her own safe recipes. This was a feat, she acknowledged, as she was not a cook prior to her diagnosis. In 1990, she published her first cookbook, "The Gluten Free Gourmet."

When my kids were first diagnosed with celiac disease, I agonized over how I would be able to feed them. Cheerios are a staple in a toddler's diet. What would I do about birthday parties and snacks at nursery school?

Like a good friend, Hagman was there. Not only did she offer recipes, she helped me reorganize my kitchen. With her guidance, I pre-mixed the dry ingredients needed to make bread, pancakes and muffins. I was able to whip up pancakes and waffles on a school day just as quickly as if I were using Bisquick. With a bread machine, in eight minutes, including cleanup, I could make a loaf that was ready for the oven.

Hagman may not be a household name, but those with celiac disease knew her well.

She turned 85 years old Aug. 10. Her husband of 64 years, Joe Leif Hagman, died one year earlier. She met him at Linfield College in northern Oregon. Bette is survived by her daughter, a grandson, great grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

Loretta Jay is the co-chairwoman of the Connecticut Children's Celiac Group and on the board of the Greater New Haven Celiac Group (www.connceliac.org). She is the president of Parasol LLC, an organization that specializes in the management of celiac disease and food allergies. Write to her at 116 Rolling Ridge Road, Fairfield 06824. E-mail: lorettajay@parasolservices.com.