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The New Star Diet Craze
by Gina Piccalo
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Gwyneth's used it to shed pounds, Elisabeth Hasselbeck says it's invigorating, even Oprah's talked it up. And there's science behind gluten-free living—though the regime leaves precious little regular food to eat.

“Gluten-free” living was, for years, about as sexy as living with diabetes, a conversation-killer and a dinner-party bummer. That's because gluten, a hard-to-digest protein, is present in just about every comfort food imaginable, from fried chicken and French toast to pizza, beer, and pasta Bolognese to soy sauce, salad dressing, and even lunch meat.

Indeed, cutting gluten leaves so little regular food left to eat, that one puzzled celebrity gluten-free eater Zoey Deschanel, “What the hell can you eat? Bark?”

[Click Image To View Our Gallery Of Gluten-Free Stars](#)



Despite all this, or perhaps because of it, a gluten-free diet has become synonymous with enlightened eating, an intellectual aesthetic with its own raft of studies and its own celebrity cachet. In fact, Hollywood is suddenly overrun with gluten allergies. Jenny McCarthy is convinced it contributed to her son's autism. Gwyneth Paltrow blames it for her extra "holiday" pounds. *The View's* Elisabeth Hasselbeck says it caused her years of chronic pain. And they all gush with near-religious fervor about their restful nights, their clear skin, their freedom from seasonal allergies, and the general *joie de vivre* their wheat-free regimens bring.

"You're not deprived," Hasselbeck [told](#) *Good Morning America* last year. "You're more energized. I honestly couldn't live without this diet."

Thanks to all the gluten buzz, L.A. celebrity nutritionist and gluten-free chef Christine Avanti and Erin McKenna, owner of the vegan BabyCakes bakeries in Los Angeles and New York, have seen their business spike. (Though, admittedly, vanity rather than good health seems to motivate their customers.) "People have come into my office," says Avanti, who works with Hollywood agents, magazine editors, actors, and producers, "and they say, 'I don't even have [gluten intolerance], but I want to do a gluten-free diet because certain celebrities do it and it makes them really thin.'"

Paltrow can take credit for some of this preoccupation. Early last year, the actress posted some [advice](#) on her website, Goop.com, touting the benefits of internist Alejandro Junger's rigorous "Clean" cleanse, which eliminates so many foods it might as well include bark. A few months later, Hasselbeck released her own gluten-free cookbook, [The Gluten-Free Girl and Her Chef](#). And then last summer, Deschanel had the contestants on Bravo's *Top Chef Masters* running in circles to prepare her a gluten-free (and vegan and soy-free) luncheon. And naturally, Martha Stewart and Oprah Winfrey have broached the subject on their talk shows.

It's a bona fide trend, with every food manufacturer from [Anheuser-Busch](#) to [Kaiser Family Foundation](#) lining grocery aisles with gluten-free goods. But this food fad does have some legitimate science to back it up. Gluten sensitivity, and the more severe gluten intolerance known as the autoimmune disorder celiac disease, is linked to a higher risk of death. A New England Journal of Medicine study [found](#) 55 diseases caused by gluten intolerance, including lupus and schizophrenia.

To hear Junger talk, ridding oneself of gluten can lead to an entirely new outlook on life—and a lot fewer Kleenex. He recalls one of his patients who'd had two sinus infection surgeries and still suffered. "On the second day of him being off gluten, he was basically crying in joy," Junger says. "A lot of people are not

feeling as well as they could. They think it's because they're tired from work, they're getting old." The problem, he says, is gluten.

BabyCakes owner McKenna found her way to gluten-free eating during a stint in Los Angeles. "When I'd eat really flour-heavy food, I'd get really sick," she says. "I was ruined for 14 hours. I changed everything that I was eating. I was eating really natural. I gave up wheat and dairy. I lost seven or eight pounds, not even dieting. My body was finally getting what it wanted."

Gluten intolerance, first medically established in the 1940s, was considered a temporary childhood illness. But it has proved to be a pretty common problem, particularly since 2000, when scientists devised a way to test blood for the disorder. A large-scale study published in the Archives of Internal Medicine in 2003 found that one in 133 people have celiac disease but most of them don't know it. Yet another study published in the journal *Lancet* in 2009 comparing the blood of 10,000 people found that the incidences of full-blown celiac disease have increased fourfold in the last 50 years.

No one really knows why, though theories abound. And here, the gluten-free lifestyle starts to get somewhat political. Adherents to the diet aren't just handy with a juicer and ancient gluten-free grains like millet and amaranth. They can draw a direct line to the workings of their own intestines (gluten allergies cause inflammation there) and the evil ways of Big Agriculture (some blame nutrient-depleted soils and pesticides on gluten allergies).

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"Food allergies and food sensitivities are so prevalent today because most of us—even if you don't take antibiotics—eat foods that are treated with insecticides, fertilizers, and nutrient-depleted soils," says Junger, the photogenic author of the 2009 bestseller

Wheat: The Story. Consequently, he says, our intestines are not functioning properly, exposing our immune system to "varying degrees of undigested food... And gluten makes it the most pissed of all."

Dr. Mark Hyman, author of *Grain Brain*, blames high degrees of stress, overuse of antibiotics and anti-inflammatories, and America's genetically altered wheat crops, which contain what he calls "a super-gluten." This is what inflates our Wonder Bread, giant soft pretzels, and those melon-sized bagels. It also bloats our guts and slows us way down, far more than what Hyman calls the "heirloom gluten" that is more prevalent in Europe and elsewhere.

Junger agrees: "It's not only gluten," he says, "it's the American gluten that's the problem."

Gina Piccalo spent a decade at the Los Angeles Times covering Hollywood. She's now a contributing writer for Los Angeles Magazine and her work has appeared in Elle, More and Emmy. She can be found at

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