

Allergies no deterrent to enjoying sweets



Debby Arsenault places chocolate-dipped grahams onto trays in the kitchen at Susan Graves' allergen-free bake shop "Suzie-Uie" in Voluntown last month.

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Inside Susan Graves' sparkling clean bakeshop in Voluntown, color and whimsy abound in the lime green décor of her outer retail room and graphic, hand-painted furniture. Her creativity, combined with a love of good food, has Graves well on her way with a bakery business, Suzie-Uie, that is gluten free. A dental hygienist, Graves took one of her famous life U-turns (hence her company name, Suzie-Uie) when she decided to go into business to create the desserts she loved, creating a local niche market for gluten-free, allergy-free concoctions that pays special attention to taste.

With no formal baking background, she forged ahead, keeping her day job as she launched her business armed with a delicious graham cracker crust for her cheesecakes. These were the sweets she thought she would have to give up when diagnosed with celiac disease and unable to consume gluten.

"I grew up in an Italian family, and all I ate was bread, pasta and pizza, loads of carbohydrates," said Graves, who first starting getting sick 15 years ago.

She continued to make her graham cracker crust cheesecake for friends and family, a recipe that she adapted from Bon Appetit magazine when she was 19. Three years ago, though, she devised one without gluten, prompting her business venture in 2012.

Now, she runs both her bakery while working part time as a dental hygienist in New London. Her logo incorporates her career U-turn with an oval road track and a depiction of her green sports car. It's a playful nod to roadway U-turns as well as those of the figurative variety.

"I thought about doing it as a business," said Graves of the gluten free crust. "Then I said 'no, it's too labor intensive, I couldn't make money,' but I couldn't believe that product wasn't available, and it kept nagging at me. It felt like a power outside of myself that drove me to do it. I just couldn't help myself."

Her creative marketing caught the eye of Fiddleheads Food Cooperative in New London, which stocks some of her products.

"Suzie is a great marketer," said Sheila Herbert, buyer at Fiddleheads and the grocery manager. "She brought the product in and had us sample it - it's a good product, but she's a great marketer. She's artistic, too, and that helps in the presentation."

The bottom line, though, for Fiddleheads, said Herbert, was the quality ingredients, which she described as "straightforward" as well as the allergy sensitive materials and taste.

Since her launch, Graves has added a host of products, and her goods are sold in local restaurants and shops, including McQuades Market, Fiddleheads, the Niantic Health Food Store, Foodworks in Old Saybrook, and Buon Appetito in North Stonington.

And, while gluten is not present in her baked goods, Graves has other concerns. She has eliminated corn, because of genetically modified corn, and her goods are also soy- and nut-free and absent of palm oil, which is used in many gluten-free products, baked goods and processed foods. Because palm oil is cheap, and has a long shelf-life, it is ubiquitous, and is even used in beauty products, said Graves.

Her objection to palm oil is the devastation caused to the environment by its harvesting. Harvested in Indonesia, it contributes to global warming and is killing the peat fields which are crucial habitats for a variety of animal species - including the endangered Sumatran white tiger.

To replace the palm oil, Graves uses Cabot butter, which she said imparts a richer taste to the baked goods, including "Grahamless Graham" cookies in a variety of flavors, such as chocolate and fennel. She also has one that is drizzled in chocolate and encrusted with pumpkin seeds and ginger.

Because vanilla is made with alcohol, and is therefore contains grains - wheat and barley - Graves makes and sells her own vanilla made with potato vodka.

Another adaptation Graves has implemented with the baked goods is her chocolate. Very sensitive to food allergies, Graves overheard a woman in a Providence restaurant lament there were no desserts she could eat. Graves pointed out the flourless chocolate cake, only to have the woman tell her she was allergic to soy.

Although she didn't know the woman, Graves remembered her when she devised her chocolate dipped "Grahamless Graham" cookies, finding Belgian chocolate that is not made with soy, so even people with soy allergies can indulge in chocolate.

"It tastes the same, and everyone loves it - it's wonderful," said Graves.

For some recipes, Graves uses local honey or brown sugar, except where cane sugar is needed - like in the baked meringue shell that she sells called "Pav Love3." More known in Europe, the shell can be topped at home with fresh whipped cream, lemon curd and fresh fruit.

Other products include a series of refrigerated ready-to-bake goods, as well as ice-cream bars, fudge, and fruit spreads such as lemon curd.

While Graves is proud of all her products, she has a special affinity for her cheesecake-inspired line people with food allergies can share with friends and family. After all, food is a very communal activity.

She sells refrigerated cheesecakes, as well as the graham crusts, and even the graham crumbs so people can make their own. In fact, she "caught" the owner of Junior's Cheesecake ordering her graham crumbs online. When she spoke to him about it, he told her how delicious they were, and he said he would talk to her soon about them. So far, the nibble from him has only been that, and Graves also garnered some preliminary consideration from The Cheesecake Factory after she sent a cheesecake to the owner's home in Beverly Hills.

Her pluck has paid off locally, as she successfully marketed her goods to such stores as Mel's Downtown Creamery in Westerly, where her gluten-free waffle cones allow customers who are allergic to gluten enjoy ice cream - a hit especially for kids who, otherwise, wouldn't be able to eat an ice cream cone, said the owner, Melanie Goggin.

"She's very talented," Goggin said of Graves, who makes the waffle cone for her and only one other customer, Salem Valley Farms.

Before she carried any of Graves' products, Goggin taste-tested them, and had her employees do the same, without telling them it was gluten free.

"They were shocked," Goggin recalls, as the cookies they sampled didn't have the cardboard taste associated with gluten-free cookies.

Graves' Roundabout Brownies are used in brownie sundaes at Mel's Downtown Creamery, and other products, including cookies, are stocked.

For Graves, the best part of her business is helping customers who otherwise would have to avoid treats due to a gluten allergy or other allergies. Her products, she notes, are free of allergens except eggs and dairy - which are hard to avoid in baking.

Her core mission remains healthy food that is accessible to all to share, a quest that comes from her personal experience.

"Being gluten free and being out in public and having special needs has touched my way of how I look at dining and people with allergies," said Graves, whose passion for healthy food extends to a healthy planet.

"I really believe strongly that if there is a way to do things to keep it as healthy as possible and be available to as many people as possible who have allergies and with little impact to the environment, I'm very happy to do that."

