

Rebecca Rolls tells Anna Tait Jamieson how she rose to the challenge of making good gluten-free bread.

FOUR years ago, when customers asked artisan baker Rebecca Rolls if she made gluten-free loaves, she said no. Bread without gluten didn't seem possible. It is the protein in wheat (also barley and rye) that gives dough its structure. So, no, she'd explain, her specialty was slow-leavened bread made with freshly-ground wheat.

But never say never. These days Rolls works from a wheat-free bakery, making gluten-free loaves that are among the best on the market.

So what changed her mind? Initially, it was the persistence of gluten-free shoppers who continued to ask. "It bothered me I was turning people away. I wanted to be able to satisfy the demand and it started to niggle me, so I thought I'll go and find out what gluten-free bread is like."

It was, she admits, a whole new world. Sufferers of the auto-immune coeliac disease and others with a less specific intolerance to gluten have to avoid the breads most people eat. They are restricted to loaves made from grains such as rice or corn bolstered with gums and raising agents that compensate for the gluten that's missing.

The quality is improving as more bakeries add gluten-free bread to their range, but when Rolls embarked on her taste-testing mission there were very few loaves on the shelves. Some were dry and some were gummy.

"I never finished a loaf... I didn't get that satisfied feeling I was used to from my own handmade bread." But, far from being put off, her interest



Like the real thing: Rebecca Rolls spent two years developing her gluten-free bread from beyond the "low and sunken", and, above right, some of her specialist loaves.

was piqued and she decided to see if she could do any better. "I have always loved experimenting so I started looking around at different flour mixes and even the grains themselves, just trying things out."

She soon discovered her knowledge of conventional bread-making wasn't much help. The gluten-free method was quite different and much less forgiving. Her first attempts were "sort of low and sunken", and while customers were politely encouraging, Rolls wasn't



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happy. She wanted to create more than a substitute loaf. "I wanted it to be like you're eating bread. I wanted it to be the real thing."

She had three criteria: the bread had to perform like wheat bread and not crumble when sliced thinly; it had to have a fresh satisfying flavour; and it had to be nutritious.

It took two years to develop but she ticked all the boxes. Her basic loaf is based on home-ground brown rice and includes plain rice and tapioca flours, fresh eggs, honey, sesame, linseed and yeast. She says the freshness of the ingredients and grinding her own grains gives her bread its good flavour, but she's not saying what it is that makes it perform so much better than most. "All my knowledge about the bread, I keep really secret. I've had companies come and ask if they can bake the bread and use their distribution channels, but as soon as they bake it they've got the recipe so I've had to be really tight-lipped about it."

For a time she continued to bake both wheat and gluten-free breads but as sales of the latter outstripped those of her original range, she decided to abandon wheat altogether. As a consequence she no longer eats wheat bread herself – a dietary change that

has made her aware of her own gluten intolerance. "For years I would get tired around three o'clock. If I didn't have a sleep I would get foggy and tired... now I don't get tired in the afternoons and I have an extra hour and a half in the day. And heaps of people say that, they come to the stall and say they have a lot more energy."

"People are realising what wheat does. A lot of people can live for years with an upset bloated stomach without knowing why and then they cut out wheat and it's like, oh man! – is that what it was."

Whatever the reason, the demand for gluten-free keeps on rising. Rolls' Thoroughbread range has expanded to include pizza bases, cakes, and loaves flavoured with carrot and fennel, olive and rosemary, and walnut and herbs. She supplies shops and cafes throughout the North Island and continues to run her own stall at Wellington's Victoria St Market and at Paraparaumu Beach.

The markets keep her in touch with a clientele who call her a lifesaver for supplying bread that's fresh, healthy and as good as the "normal bread" they've had to forego. Then there is the customer who buys a loaf every week – he's not gluten intolerant, he just likes the taste.