



Chuck E. Cheese's:

Where a gluten-free kid can be a kid

In select stores in 2012, Chuck E. Cheese's began test marketing Bake-in-Bag® personal-sized cheese pizza from Conte's Pasta and individual chocolate cupcakes from Fabe's All Natural Bakery. Both products are certified gluten-free. The test market was such a success that these gluten-free offerings were rolled out nationwide in November 2012.

The news of Chuck E. Cheese's gluten-free menu options broke around the same time that a different chain restaurant began offering a gluten-free pizza crust, so the news was understandably met with some skepticism by the gluten-free community. I wondered how they could deliver a safe gluten-free pizza without cross-contamination in a kitchen that makes wheat-based items. My concerns were put to rest when I learned that both the pizzas and the cupcakes arrive in pre-sealed single-serve packaging to be opened and served table-side with a disposable pizza cutter.

The idea for the Bake-in-Bag® Pizza came quite by chance when Joe Elliot, Chuck E. Cheese's Vice President of Research and Development, was attending a food show. The company had been researching gluten-free pizzas and had narrowed it down to a few choice brands. At this food show, Conte's booth happened to be next to a company offering bake-in-bag technology. It was there with Mike Conte, President of Conte's, that both the idea and the research began.

The result is a pizza that arrives frozen and is cooked in its sealed bag, going from freezer to oven to table all while remaining sealed. Delivering safe gluten-free food is a top priority for the company, so much so that guests who may be unfamiliar with their gluten-free fare are walked through the process by employees. Their staff is trained to retrieve the products from the freezer and help the customer feel at ease by explaining the details of preparation.

"Given that gluten-free products are something we've wanted to offer for the last few years," Elliot says, "it feels very gratifying to deliver a product that reflects our commitment to providing even our guests with strict gluten intolerance with a product that still tastes great and expands the Chuck E. Cheese's experience from games to food and fun for so many families. It's a great example of how we're working towards consistent quality across the board to make all facets of guests' visits more enjoyable."



Joe Elliot is no stranger to gluten-free food, as his wife followed a gluten-free diet for a period of time. Joe, like most of us who follow a gluten-free diet, knows that all gluten-free food is not created equal. The company places high value on "eating their way" through the research to find and offer quality products that taste good and are free of cross contamination.

Chuck E. Cheese's is the first national chain to offer take-n-bake pizzas to my knowledge. Because the pizzas are sealed, they can be purchased frozen and taken home for future use. Each pizza comes with written preparation instructions on the bag and is very reasonably priced at \$5.99 each, which is the same cost as their similar-sized wheat-based cheese pizza. The chocolate cupcakes, which are fruit juice sweetened and free of artificial colors and flavors, sell for \$2.99 each. I applaud the company for not overcharging for the pizzas, allowing families to enjoy a safe and economical meal. While there are still more food allergies to address in the future (such as dairy/casein), gluten was one they felt could be successfully addressed at this time.

There are more than 560 Chuck E. Cheese's location in the U.S., so if you have never been before, I hope you'll stop by and give their gluten-free menu items a try. 



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: **Jennifer D. Harris** was diagnosed with celiac disease more than 15 years ago and has turned her diagnosis into a thriving career and an opportunity to help the newly diagnosed. In addition to avoiding gluten, Jennifer also avoids dairy/casein, hydrogenated oils, and MSG. Jennifer is a Gluten-Free Product Specialist and an Industry Consultant for her own consulting company, Just Gluten-Free. She also is the marketing coordinator for Pure Knead, a dedicated gluten-free and allergen-friendly bakery in Georgia. Email Jennifer at: jenniferharris326@gmail.com