



MARILYN SANTULLI

Marilyn Santulli's gluten intolerance did not prevent her from baking; she created American Gra-Frutti, a dedicated gluten-free bakery in Roswell, Georgia, to meet increasing demand for gluten-free products. Her decadent but healthy creations contain no trans-fats, preservatives, or artificial flavors and colors; many items are also free of soy, dairy, and nuts. American Gra-Frutti also offers vegan treats. Marilyn's products are in locations throughout the United States and can also be shipped to customers.



My personal journey to gluten-free living — and my gluten-free bakery and product line, Marilyn's Gluten Free Gourmet — had its humble beginnings on my grandmother's Seneca, Kansas, farm, long before gluten was part of the culinary vernacular. My grandma and mother canned delicious relishes from the bountiful harvest of every kind of fruit and vegetable imaginable, grown on the farm in the underground cellar Uncle Clem built for the family. I spent several weeks each summer working alongside my grandparents on their farm, learning the basics of cooking and baking.

Meals were healthy and hearty. My family cooked and baked everything from scratch, grew our own vegetables, and had free-range chickens before the term was invented. Daily, we would prepare the eggs for a truck to pick them up and take them to be sold at a farmers' market.

I vividly recall my first recipe at age 5, when I convinced my mother to let me help her make frosting. In my first bake shop, I created a gluten-free graham cracker to complement my first creation: frosting. My family's dedication to providing meals and caring for others through lovingly prepared meals proved to be a primary source of my inspiration. I would see how my mom's and grandmother's creations pleased everyone; they were women of service, and I wanted to be part of that. I learned to bake and cook at an early age — and with a God-given passion! To this day, I feel most comfortable in the kitchen because it brings back such fond memories.

As is often the case with entrepreneurial ventures, my road to realizing this dream was not a direct path. I continued to cook and bake as a hobby, selling a delectable fruit cake made from an old family recipe at farmers' markets. (The genesis of my company's first name, American Gra-Frutti, was inspired by the cake.) I also took on the roles of wife and mother of three children. Working outside the home meant taking on yet another role as a motivational technical presenter for an extensive client list, including IBM, The Coca-Cola Company, Lexus, the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, and Deloitte & Touche. There was even an acting role on the television show "In the Heat of the Night" with the late Carroll O'Connor.

After 18 years of promoting other companies, I decided to bake my lifelong passion into my own bakery and company. My decision was motivated not only by my drive, but also by my health. In early 2008, after a series of undiagnosed health issues, my physician determined gluten to be the source of my many ailments. This revelation not only changed my life, but also the trajectory of my fledgling company, American Gra-Frutti. I was now compelled to create delicious gourmet baked goods with gluten-free ingredients. →



CRANBERRY-CHIP BANANA MUFFINS

Courtesy of American Gra-Frutti — Marilyn's Gluten Free Gourmet
Makes 6 muffins

- 1 ripe banana (or ½ cup fruit of choice)
- ¼ cup sugar
- 1 large egg
- ¼ cup water or almond milk
- 1 tsp. vanilla
- 1¼ cups Marilyn's GFG Multi-Purpose Baking Mix (or a GF baking mix)
- ½ cup cranberries
- ¼ cup chocolate chips

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease muffin tins or use baking cups.
2. Mash banana with sugar, set aside.
3. Meanwhile, whisk egg lightly, and add water and vanilla. Add baking mix, and incorporate by hand-mixing.
4. Stir in mashed banana, cranberries, and chocolate chips. Spoon into a greased or lined muffin tin, about 2/3 full. Bake for 18–20 minutes.



My new company had provided me with an unexpected mission. During my research and conversations with friends, I learned that exposure to the tiniest amount of gluten could mean serious harm to many people living with a gluten intolerance or Celiac disease. I designated my facility to be a gluten-free environment, requiring my employees to leave anything containing wheat outside the baking facility. In earnest, I began creating decadent but nutritious, healthy foods that would be safe for people with these intolerances.

The growth of my business coincides with the spotlight on gluten intolerance and Celiac disease in recent years by the media; one prominent face of Celiac's being "The View" co-host Elisabeth Hasselback. With the addition of Marilyn's Gluten Free Gourmet division, the company rolled out product lines and has an expanded bakery location in

Roswell, Georgia, which opened in 2011. The new space features a selection of gourmet, gluten-free products: breads, muffins, cakes, and artisanal oven-baked crackers. Also sharing shelf space are gluten-free fruit cakes, Peachtree Pimento spread, and roasted coconut drops; the latter is a tribute to all the homemade candy made on my family's Kansas farm.

The success of the physical location dovetails with the success of my wholesale business. Whole Foods Market has been a wonderful regional partner, offering future growth plans as well as additional retail chains on the horizon. To be able to offer these products to every customer while paying homage to my family's farm roots is a dream come true. All those summers spent gathering fruit and chasing chickens on my grandmother's farm have paid off! ❁



CITRUS POUND CAKE WITH STRAWBERRY-LAVENDER SAUCE

Makes 2 loaves

We bake several variations and sizes using this same recipe — from a pound cake with a glaze, to stacked round cakes with strawberry-lavender sauce between the layers and spooned over the top. Enjoy with dollops of whipped cream!

STRAWBERRY-LAVENDER SAUCE

16 oz. (3 cups) strawberries
 ¼ cup water
 2 TB. sugar
 1 tsp. lavender

1. Hull strawberries. Place ⅓ of strawberries in a food processor, and pulse until about ¼-inch in size. Slice remaining strawberries in half, then slice into ¼-inch slices. Set aside.
2. Place water, sugar, and lavender in a small saucepan over medium-high heat. Bring to a boil and cook 1 minute to allow the lavender to steep.
3. Add chopped strawberries and cook until heated throughout. The color will lighten and texture will soften. Remove from heat and add sliced strawberries.

CAKE

1 cup butter, room temperature
 1¾ cups organic cane sugar
 1 tsp. vanilla extract or almond extract
 4 eggs, room temperature
 1 (18 oz.) bag Marilyn's GFG Multi-Purpose Baking Mix (or 18 oz. GF baking mix)
 1¼ cup buttermilk
 Zest of 1 lemon or orange

1. Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Lightly grease 1 loaf pan and 2, 6-inch round pans, with gluten-free spray or oil. If desired, dust pans with rice flour to keep from sticking, or use parchment rounds.
2. In a standard mixer, cream butter and sugar until pale in color, fluffy, and smooth, approximately 3–4 minutes. Add vanilla and eggs, one at a time, mixing well after each addition.
3. Add baking mix butter mixture, alternating with buttermilk, blending on low speed until combined. Do not over-beat. Stir in lemon or orange zest by hand.
4. Divide batter into pans. Spread evenly with a spatula. Bake in preheated oven for approximately 40 minutes, or until a wooden toothpick inserted in center comes out clean. Do not over-bake.
5. Leave cakes in pans for 5–10 minutes. Remove cakes from pans and put on a plate.
6. Let cakes cool completely before assembling layers with strawberry-lavender sauce. Put one cake layer on a plate, and trim domed top to achieve a flat surface if needed. Top with strawberry-lavender sauce. Place second layer, and top with remaining sauce.

