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Gluten-Free Flours & Thickening Agents

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You've likely noticed that there is an extensive selection of gluten-free flours available these days. Where do you start, and what should be used for what? Is there just one that can be substituted for wheat flour? It's always beneficial to do some tinkering and experimenting with your own recipes to see what meets your tastes and works best for you, but here's a short guide to get you going.

- **Gluten-Free Flour Blends**

For most recipes, use of one single gluten-free flour is not ideal. Instead, a blend of several yields best results. Many "one to one" all purpose gluten-free flour blends are now commercially available. Not that many years ago, it was necessary to mix up your own blend. While this is of course still an option, many consumers appreciate the convenience of being able to purchase an "all purpose" GF flour that is ready to go.

Be aware that some all purpose gluten-free flours/baking mixes contain xanthan gum (or a similar binding agent) and some do not. These binding agents substitute for the gluten in wheat flour, which provides similar structure. Often, "flours" do not contain a binder, while "baking mixes" do. Be sure to read ingredients. If the blend you use does not contain xanthan gum (or a similarly functioning binding agent) you'll need to add it in when baking.

Experiment with various gluten-free blends and see which you like the best, and which yields results you like in your favorite recipes.

- **Single Gluten-Free Flours**

Like the grains they come from, individual flours have distinctive flavors. The way they function in recipes also varies in terms of texture and structure.

You may discover that you are partial to the flavor of a specific gluten-free flour, like teff or buckwheat, for example. This doesn't mean you can sub these in to recipes that call for wheat flour and

Gluten-free flours and thickening agents include:

Almond flour, amaranth flour, arrowroot starch, bean flour, buckwheat flour, coconut flour, corn flour or masa, corn starch, hazelnut or other nut flour, millet flour, oat flour (certified or labeled GF), quinoa flour, potato flour, potato starch flour, rice flour (white), rice flour (brown), rice flour (sweet/sticky), sorghum flour, soy flour, tapioca starch, teff flour.

Note:

It is best to purchase labeled or certified gluten-free versions.

Avoid purchasing from bulk bins due to risk of cross-contact with gluten-containing products.



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expect successful results (although depending on the recipe this can sometimes work). There are many gluten-free blogs and cookbooks which offer recipes; do some searching and reading of reviews to find recipes that use the flours you especially like. In recent years, various chefs and cookbook authors have explored the unique and delicious flavors of gluten-free flours, proving that they are worth exploring whether you need to be gluten-free or not.

- **Flours that aren't made from grains**

Nuts and beans can be sources of gluten-free flours too: soy, garbanzo, almond, and coconut to name a few. Keep an eye out for new gluten-free flours made from fruits and vegetables too. These flours tend to have distinctive flavors and textural aspects, and should generally be used in combination with other flours, or in recipes specifically developed for their use.

- **Thickening Agents**

Even before becoming gluten-free, you may have thickened a stir-fry sauce, or Thanksgiving gravy, with corn starch. Arrowroot starch works in these sorts of dishes, too. Some sauces are thickened by starting with a “roux” (a butter + flour mixture), traditionally made with wheat flour. White rice or sweet rice flour is a perfectly good substitute.

- **Shelf life and storage**

Shelf life is shorter for whole grain flours (e.g. brown rice flour vs. white rice flour), since they contain the germ and bran of the grain, which contain some oil and can therefore go rancid. Keep flours in a cool dark place, preferably refrigerated (especially whole grain flours). They freeze well too.

(shelf life guidelines: <https://wholegrainscouncil.org/recipes/cooking-whole-grains/storing-whole-grains>)

This educational bulletin has been produced by the Gluten Intolerance Group of North America, a registered 501(c)3 organization. Learn more about GIG at www.gluten.org.

GIG is on a mission to make life easier for everyone living gluten-free.

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