

Published January 30th, 2013

## An Inspiring Tale of Food Intolerance and Granola

By Sophie Braccini



Bielawski and her children with the Giddy Up & Go granola she created for them. Photo Todd Bielawski

In her Lafayette office off Mt. Diablo Boulevard, Jennifer Bielawski juggles tons of organic oats, organic corn flakes, agave nectar and seeds of all kinds. She sets up appointments with decision makers in the retail food industry and keeps an eye on her granola factory near Sacramento. The mother of two young children has become a granola diva and successful CEO in the span of two short years. What was born from the suffering of her family has become a very successful endeavor, and it is only the beginning.

It all started when Bielawski's two children became ill, with no diagnosis or treatment in sight. "Kyle had a sinus infection that lasted for a year; he was on antibiotics and prednisone every other month. He was very prone to pneumonia and frequently ended up in the hospital as a result," remembers Bielawski. In the meantime Kyle's older sister started developing sensory issues and was becoming more and more withdrawn and lethargic. There were still no answers after seeing many different specialists until Bielawski herself got sick and was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis. She researched her symptoms and the causes and found the link with her children's condition: multiple food

intolerance.

Acupuncturist Michael Shpak explained to her how food intolerances created a vicious cycle that culminated with all the symptoms. The family changed its diet dramatically, eliminating all grain, starch, lactose and sucrose. "I opened my pantry and there was nothing there I could use anymore," she remembers. "I called my friends and asked them to take everything away."

Then Bielawski started cooking, because she could not find anything already made in stores that could feed her family. "Very quickly I wanted to produce commercial food for those who are lactose and gluten intolerant," she says, "and I started with granola." She created Thoughtful Food, the company that produces Giddy Up & Go Granola.

One of the first difficulties was finding an organic gluten free oat producer. "To be certified gluten free, the oat has to be processed with equipment that never touches something containing gluten." She struggled to find a producer that was also organic. She finally found one in Montana; he was harvesting his first crop that year and she was one of his first customers.

At first Bielawski rented a professional kitchen and did everything herself, including the packaging and applying labels to her bags. With a background in sales, she started presenting her products to local grocers. "Connie Collier at Diablo Foods was one of the first ones to buy my product and put it on her shelves exactly two years ago," she says. Then came Lunardi's and Whole Foods.

"Then in May I got an order from Sysco Food - the distributor - for a whole pallet of granola, 50 cases. It took me five days with my mom who had come to help, to bake it and bag it. At that point I knew we needed a professional facility and we hired some people from the food industry," she said. She and her husband invested their own money in the project, they found well-off friends who were interested and wanted to invest, and they raised \$1 million.

"What made a really big difference for us is the contract with Safeway," she says. The company is developing its organic offering in select stores and chose her granola. She sold 65,000 pounds of granola in 2012 and expects to sell 10 times that amount in 2013. "There is no competition for what we do," she says. "We keep our margin very low so the product stays affordable. And since people love it, retailers order more."

Along the way Bielawski enrolled her sister, who has an MBA, to be the CFO and her nephew manages the production. She has learned everything about certification, both organic and allergen free. "We do not process any peanut at any time," she says. "We are very close to our product and everything is numbered and recorded. If you show me one bag, with its number I can immediately trace where each of its components comes from." Bielawski understands food intolerance and its negative effects; she stresses that she will stay on top of what she gives to others.

Today her children are free of symptoms, stick to the non-dairy, non-gluten diet and live a happy, full life. Bielawski is thinking about expanding her food line, maybe with pizza rolls, chicken pot pies, stuffing, or fauxsggetti (spaghetti). "I think everything happens for a reason," she says. "I feel there is a higher calling for what I am doing."

For more information on food intolerance Bielawski recommends Elaine Gottschall's book, "Breaking the Vicious Cycle." Giddy Up & Go Granola can be found in most local grocery stores. For more information, visit [www.thoughtfulfood.net](http://www.thoughtfulfood.net).

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Reach the reporter at: [sophie@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:sophie@lamorindaweekly.com)

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