

# Beer buzz without the grief

## City firm creates gluten-free brew

By: Geoff Kirbyson



[ENLARGE IMAGE](#) 

Marilena Moccia shows off the gluten-free beer now available in her Italian restaurant. (JOE BRYKSA / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS)

Manitoba celiacs can now experience a beer buzz without the gastrointestinal side effects that come from drinking traditional lagers and ales.

Frio!, a new barley-free light beer, recently hit liquor store shelves and the fridges of select restaurants and bars around town.

Created by Winnipeg-based F James Specialty Beverage Company, Frio! is geared almost exclusively to celiacs, people with a hereditary auto-immune disease that prevents them from properly processing gluten, an ingredient in many common cereal grains, including barley and wheat.

Jim Venn, CEO of F James, said the market for gluten-free beer is about 250,000 hectolitres, or about one per cent of the total beer market. He said Frio! -- which is Spanish for "cold" -- is a light, lager-style of beer.

"One might compare it to a Coors Light. It's meant to be a cold summer drink as much as anything else," Venn said.

He said he is already looking at expansion opportunities for Frio!, which is brewed under contract at Fort Garry Brewing's south Winnipeg plant.

"We have serious interest from B.C. and Alberta and hope to be shipping there over the next three months. If we get enough market entry, we may build a facility, but the current business model calls for it to be processed in co-pack arrangements at various breweries in various jurisdictions under our supervision and testing regime," he said.

Jim McCarthy, executive director of the Canadian Celiac Association, said only a few years ago, the celiac market was estimated at one in 400 people, but with better testing procedures, he now pegs it at about one per cent, or 300,000 Canadians. He said the vast majority of those afflicted with the genetic disorder haven't been formally diagnosed. He said the symptoms range from general malaise of headaches and feeling run down to stomach problems, bloating, diarrhea and constipation.

"The nature of the disease is the immune system attacks the small intestine and destroys the lining. People then effectively suffer from malnutrition. They're not getting enough iron and protein, the things they need to survive," he said.

McCarthy said there is no cure, but the remedy is a life-long strict adherence to a gluten-free diet. He said the market for gluten-free products is growing by about 15 per cent annually and is projected to be worth \$2.4 billion in North America by 2012. They cost more than traditional products, but it's worth it, he said.

"It's a quality life issue. More than 80 per cent of celiacs won't go out (to a restaurant) to eat. They don't know the places they go will be safe. It's a food safety issue for them," he said.

Marilena Moccia, general manager at Mona Lisa Ristorante Italiano, has been offering Frio! since it came out last month to complement its menu of gluten-free pastas and

pizzas. She said the chefs are "extremely cautious" to ensure there's no cross-contamination with gluten products.

"The pastas are boiled in different water, the pizzas are made in separate pans and cut on a different board with a different knife. It's quite serious. Some customers have a higher degree of allergy. We pay special attention to that," she said.

Moccia said Mona Lisa is hoping to complete its gluten-free menu shortly with the addition of chocolate cakes and cookies.

"If one celiac person is at the table, they're able to participate in the meal and feel like part of the group," she said.

Venn, the former CEO of Dominion Malting Ltd., the Winnipeg-based producer of malt, a primary ingredient in beer, said he intends to spend the first year building up Frio! before turning to a heavier beer, a red one, for instance. "The mainstream segment of beer is very crowded right now. There are lots of products issued by Molson and Labatt. This company is only interested in producing specialty-type products," he said.

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