

# SunSentinel

## Fort Lauderdale mom creates baking club for children with dietary restrictions



Jereann Zann's children work on a "Out of this World Cookie Kit" as part of Little GF Chefs baking club. This monthly program for kids is designed to help those with dietary restrictions have a healthier relationship with food. (Photo/Courtesy)

By [Catie Wegman](#) South Florida Sun Sentinel | Jul 26, 2019 | 12:53 PM

Jereann Zann remembers taking her then 5-year-old daughter Sophia to a friend's birthday party. There was an "over-the-top, unbelievable" dessert station, Zann said, and she would catch Sophia staring, practically drooling, over a platter of doughnuts.

But Sophia couldn't eat them.

She has celiac disease, an autoimmune condition in which the body has no way of digesting gluten. If ingested, the body attacks the small intestine, which is responsible for nutrition absorption. Sophia also developed an allergy to dairy.

The responses to eating gluten vary, but Zann said it would cause Sophia to become very sick – often vomiting for hours.

"She knew she was different, and when she was really little it didn't bother her that much, as long as we had something for her, like a cupcake or cookie she could eat," said Zann, of Fort Lauderdale. "But as she got older, and she started going to more birthday parties and classrooms through school, that feeling of being different really started to become a lot more noticeable."

Zann saw her daughter's self-confidence begin to plummet and food-related anxieties creep in. So she took matters into her own hands to make sure Sophia's disease didn't get the best of her.

About six months ago, she created a monthly baking subscription service called [Little GF Chefs](#), to help children on restricted diets address food anxiety and low self-confidence. All recipes are free from gluten and the top eight allergens – dairy, egg, fish, crustacean, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat and soy.

One of the things that helped her a ton was when I got her in the kitchen with me," Zann said of Sophia, now 7. "It was teaching her to have a more positive relationship with food, instead of fearing it. It gave her a sense of control over something she normally doesn't have control over. And it was really fun!"

Each baking kit comes with the necessary dry ingredients for the baked good and toppings; plant-based dyes and sprinkles; a baking tool so kids can start their own collection; and, most importantly, a very detailed recipe card that lists what is in every ingredient.

"There's a lot of times we worry and stress over things, and to have the ability to have something come to your home that you know is safe and is going to be a blast to make, it's a wonderful thing," Zann said.





Little GF Chefs is a monthly baking club for kids with restricted diets to combat food anxiety and overcome low self-confidence. Some of the baking kits have included recipes for Unicorn Donuts and Pumpkin Cake Pops. (Photo/Courtesy)





Jereann Zann of Fort Lauderdale is the founder of Little GF Chefs, a monthly baking club for kids with restricted diets to have a positive relationship with food. (Photo/Courtesy)

Children with restricted diets often feel isolated, and Zann said these kids are more prone to developing anxiety because of the constant fear of what will happen if they accidentally eat something they're not supposed to.

"That's hard, and it started to take a toll on her self-confidence. I know that it did," she said. "Children, especially little children, just want to fit in. They want to be like everyone else."

The back-to-school season can be one of the most stressful times of the year for both parents and children, especially those with a dietary restriction.

The Zann family had learned to manage Sophia's disease since she was diagnosed at age 2, but there were obvious concerns sending her into uncertain situations – like school.

They took their precautions: educating Sophia, warning teachers and becoming "professional lunchbox packers," preparing gluten- and dairy-free meals daily.

And although Sophia has never had another student in her class with celiac disease, Zann said at least one or two other kids would have a severe food allergy. She knew her family was not alone in their struggles, and she wanted to share her experiences with others.

Zann started her blog [Celiac Mama](#) about three years ago, sharing stories, recipes and creating a [16-page back-to-school guide for parents](#). Little GF Chefs stemmed from there.

Little GF Chef baking kits are mailed out to subscribers at the beginning of each month. There are one, three and six month subscriptions available for the club, ranging in prices from \$30 to \$168. The baking kits are sent out to new customers within three to five days. Existing subscribers receive packages by the 10th of each month.

Zann said she didn't want to bite off more than she could chew at first and only shared the news on her blog. But, the response has been positive, she said, with about 100 families nationwide subscribed to the club.

She's now able to rent a space in Pompano Beach with enough room for inventory and packaging outside the four walls of her kitchen to grow the business. Zann expects the building to be operational by mid-August.

Long-term, she hopes to launch a Little GF Chefs Academy, where children can come in and learn how to cook for themselves. She said it's vital for kids with dietary restrictions to acquire these skills at a young age.

<https://www.sun-sentinel.com/health/fl-fea-local-mom-creates-little-gluten-free-chefs-20190726-3gqkl67dj5bgdfc2kjtzztvta-story.html>