

How flavoring figures in yogurt and licorice

Q: Dannon says the stabilizer used in their yogurts (except for plain) “may” contain barley and therefore they do not recommend them as “gluten safe”. Do you have the same recommendation? I read the article in your magazine about the stabilizers in ice cream and am wondering if the same holds true for the ones Dannon uses. Or are they being legalistic in their approach now to their products being GF?

A: Dannon’s official word is that only its plain yogurts can be considered gluten safe. The others are not, the company says, because the natural flavors may contain stabilizers that come from a gluten-containing ingredient.

Michael Neuwirth, senior director of public relations, said that would be the only possible source of gluten in the yogurt.

Dannon says it is common practice for flavoring companies to use ethanol as a base to support and carry flavor. It is possible that the ethanol is derived from a source that could contain gluten, according to Dannon.

“Dannon cannot guarantee that the alcohol portion of the natural flavor system is always derived from corn,” Neuwirth said in an email.

“Due to the lack of control with regard to the ethanol source used by flavor companies, we cannot indicate our products containing natural flavors are gluten safe.”

He said the company chooses to “err on the side of safety.”

Wheat is one source of gluten that is definitely not used in the natural flavors. If it were, Dannon would have to put wheat on the label. Under the terms of the Food Allergen and Consumer Protection Act, if wheat is in a product, it has to be listed on the label.

Dannon says its yogurt does not contain wheat.

That leaves barley and rye. The Renewable Fuels Association says on its web site that ethanol can be made from any starch or sugar feedstock. But ethanol is always distilled, said Cathy Cook, communications director for the

Flavor and Extract Manufacturers Association. Any gluten present in the raw material used to make ethanol is destroyed in the process, according to the association’s scientists, Cook said in an email.

Everything we know about distillation indicates the flavorings would be gluten free. But the bottom line is that when a company tells you its product “might” contain an ingredient with gluten, you have a decision to make.

In this case, Dannon is saying: We don’t know if barley or rye are used as a source of the ethanol in our yogurts. So right now, we cannot, with certainty, say our yogurt is gluten free.

And Dannon is not the only company to point to flavorings as a possible source of gluten. La Yogurt, made by Johanna Foods, takes the same position.

Stoneyfield Farm yogurt does not say if its products are gluten free, but does warn that some of the natural flavors used to make their products may have used a grain alcohol in the extraction process.

Neuwirth said Dannon is paying attention to the proposed definition of gluten free on a label, but thinks it is too early to tell what kind of impact it might have on the gluten-safe status of its yogurt.

Although yogurt from these companies is most likely gluten free, you might want to buy from companies that are willing to say their yogurt is gluten free. These include Breyers and Yoplait and the new Fage yogurt, a popular product from Greece now showing up on supermarket shelves.

However, when you read the article that begins on page 8, you will see that right now, interpreting a food label is a tricky business. So it could be that Dannon yogurt is just as safe as the other brands.

Q: Is licorice gluten free?

A: The kind of licorice you typically find in the candy aisle is not gluten free. That’s because most licorice has wheat flour as an ingredient. In fact,

wheat flour is what often gives licorice its stretch.

The specialty gluten-free licorice on the market does not contain wheat flour. Instead, corn, rice and tapioca starch, rice and soy flour and molasses are used.

You might have trouble finding gluten-free licorice in the grocery or variety store, but it is available at some health food stores and on the Internet.

Here are a few you can try:

- * **Orgran Molasses** black licorice, at www.celiac.com and www.amazon.com
- * **Candy Tree** cherry laces and raspberry, cherry and strawberry vines, www.amazon.com, food4celiacs.com, www.shopbydiet.com
- * **Organic Fruit and Nut** licorice bites and vines, www.organicfruitsandnuts.com
- * **Running Rabbit** raspberry, black cherry and black rabbit-shaped licorice bites, www.allergygrocer.com, www.glutenfree.com
- * **Black Ace** red and black licorice, Whole Foods stores
- * **Black and White** licorice mix, as well as a selection of other licorice products, www.licorice-international.com

The question of whether licorice is “real” or not has nothing to do with whether it is gluten free.

For a candy to be “real” licorice, it has to contain licorice extract, which comes from the root of the licorice plant. This is true for both special gluten-free licorice and mainstream licorice. Most black licorice and some red licorice contain this extract.

Some of the candy we think of as licorice, including gluten-containing red Twizzlers and Red Vines, is not real licorice. In products like these, anise is often used as a flavoring to mimic the taste of licorice extract.

But flavoring is not the critical ingredient when it comes to determining whether a licorice is gluten free. Wheat flour is.