

Safe school alternative for kids nuts about peanut butter

BY LISA SCHIFFMAN

When Curt Roettig and two partners first began manufacturing roasted soybeans in 1997, they did not realize at first that they had stumbled onto something really big. As Roettig recalls, the emphasis back then was on the potential health benefits of soy products for chronic heart disease, osteoporosis and cancer.

"When we started, the peanut allergy issue was not thought about," said Roettig, vice president of The I.M. Healthy SoyNut Butter Company.

"As a total fluke, our product was made in a plant and tree-nut free facility," Roettig said. "We started getting calls asking us if this was so."

It was a Eureka moment.

Soon after, the partners developed I.M. Healthy SoyNut Butter — a peanut butter alternative that was also kosher — and the business took off. A nutty, creamy spread that has 30 percent less fat than peanut butter and is cholesterol free, the product has since been embraced by many Jewish schools, camps, and institutions.

Food allergies today have become a major public health concern. They develop when the body's immune system attacks normally harmless food proteins perceived to be harmful allergens. The immune system attacks the allergen, releasing substances such as histamine that cause inflammatory reactions affecting different areas of the body. When a reaction becomes extreme, the body goes into anaphylactic shock — an allergic reaction in which the release of histamines causes swelling, difficulty breathing, heart failure, circulatory collapse, and sometimes death. An estimated 11 million Americans suffer from food allergies of varying degrees of severity. Only avoidance of offending foods can prevent the potentially life-threatening allergic reaction.

"We're seeing children with more foods they're allergic to and they're not outgrowing the food allergies as quickly," said Dr. Scott Sicherer, associate professor of pediatrics at The Mount Sinai School of Medicine and researcher at The Jaffe Food Allergy Institute.

"Peanut allergies are one of the foods people can be allergic to, also tree nuts, soy, wheat, milk, eggs, and shellfish account for most of the problems."

As the number of school-age children with serious food allergies continues to grow, officials at many Jewish preschools, day schools and yeshivas — including many in The Five Towns — have made the decision to become peanut free. For example, Noreen Alvarado, a nurse at The Brandeis School and at Rambam Mesivta in Lawrence — which is peanut and nut free — told The Jewish Star that every food item children bring from home is careful-

ly scrutinized for potential allergens. There are currently eight children with food allergies, she said.

"I have Epi Pens (epinephrine syringes used to reverse the symptoms of anaphylaxis) in my office and we have had instances where we have had to use them."

Keeping their children safe from contamination is a daily concern for the parents of food-allergic children.

"It is a constant struggle, especially at holiday time, Jill Mindlin told The Jewish Star. Mindlin's six-year-old daughter, Mia Konoff, who was diagnosed with multiple food allergies, has had half a dozen anaphylaxis

institution serving food has to be concerned. Two key elements need to be addressed: is it safe, and can those who are not peanut-allergic accept it as peanut butter. I.M. Healthy SoyNut Butter has all the advantages of peanut butter without the legal or health hassles."

Joel Baum, executive director of The Park East Day School in Manhattan, is a staunch advocate of their product. "Until I found out about SoyNut Butter, we had cut peanut butter out completely," he told The Jewish Star. "Younger children's parents complained because their kids wouldn't eat anything else. Now (after introducing I.M. Healthy SoyNut Butter) the kids have been eating it up and enjoying it."

Besides benefiting schools and institutions, Roettig added, I.M. Healthy SoyNut Butter — available in seven creamy or crunchy varieties including chocolate at major supermarkets and specialty food stores — can be used as a peanut butter substitute when baking.

Until a cure for peanut allergies can be found, soy products such as I.M. Healthy SoyNut Butter offer a healthful alternative for those with food allergies. Mindlin is optimistic that one day Mia can benefit from promising immunotherapy treatments such as a peanut allergy vaccine that could become a prototype for other food allergy vaccines, and the development of a Chinese herbal therapy that would protect peanut allergic patients against anaphylaxis.



reactions. This year was no exception. After Mia's teacher informed Mindlin the class was going to make chocolate marshmallow dreidels for Chanukah, Mindlin sprang into action, locating and ordering a supply of Kosher, pareve, nut-free, milk-free and egg-free chocolate so that her daughter could participate in the activity safely.

Parent advocates Mindlin and Amanda Bromberg, together The Food Allergy Initiative (an advocacy group whose mission is to raise funds for treatment and awareness about food allergies), were instrumental in getting passed Gov. Eliot Spitzer's Allergy & Anaphylaxis Management Act of 2007. The landmark legislation requires the New York State Commissioner of Health to develop model state guidelines for managing food allergies in schools by June 2008.

Because of the potential severity of a peanut butter allergic reaction, the peanut butter sandwich — an iconic childhood staple — has been banned from many school lunchrooms. This has caused controversy between the parents of allergic children and those whose children do not have food allergies, and who insist that peanut butter is an indispensable part of their children's diet.

"Our product specifically addresses the peanut butter allergy issue, Roettig says. "Any

Nutty Butter Cookies:

By Frank Gonzales of Olney, MD.

Ingredients:

- 1 cup I.M. Healthy SoyNut butter (crunchy or smooth)
- 1/3-cup canola oil
- 3/4-cup sugar
- 1 cup brown sugar, packed
- 3/4-cup liquid egg substitute
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1/2-cup soy nuts
- 1 1/2 cups whole-wheat pastry flour
- 1/4-cup soy flour
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- 1/4 tsp. salt

Directions:

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Combine moist ingredients and cream until smooth. Combine dry ingredients in a small bowl. Stir dry ingredients into wet ingredients until well blended. Batter will be stiff. Take dough with fingers, shaping into one inch to one and a half inch balls. Place dough balls on prepared cookie sheet. Flatten with a fork making criss-cross patterns. Bake 10 minutes, cool on a wire rack. Make 45 cookies, 2-inch diameter.

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