



## Living Gluten-Free by **Tricia Thompson, MS, RD** The Gluten-Free Dietitian

### Flavorings & Extracts: Are They Gluten-Free?

I frequently am asked about the gluten-free status of ingredients, including natural flavor, smoke flavoring, extracts containing alcohol, and caramel.

#### **Natural Flavor**

According to the Food and Drug Administration the terms natural flavor, natural flavoring" or flavoring on a food label, means "the essential oil, oleoresin, essence or extractive, protein hydrolysate, distillate, or any product of roasting, heating or enzymolysis, which contains the flavoring constituents derived from a spice, fruit or fruit juice, vegetable or vegetable juice, edible yeast, herb, bark, bud, root, leaf or similar plant material, meat, seafood, poultry, eggs, dairy products, or fermentation products thereof, whose significant function in food is flavoring rather than nutritional."

In other words, natural flavor, natural flavoring, and flavoring may be derived from gluten-containing grains. BUT unless you see the words wheat, barley, rye, or malt on the label of food product containing natural flavor, the natural flavor *probably* does not contain protein from these sources.

Why? Under the Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act if an ingredient in an FDA-regulated food product contains protein from wheat, the word "wheat" must be included on the food label either in the ingredients list or Contains statement.

Even though natural flavoring is one of those ingredients (along with coloring and spice) that may be listed collectively, wheat protein will not be hidden. Barley is used in flavorings, such as malt flavoring and some smoke flavoring (see below) but these ingredients generally are declared in the ingredients list.

Rye also could be used in a flavoring but probably will be listed as rye flavoring (which is generally made from rye flour) in the ingredients list or used in a food product you wouldn't eat anyway, such as a bread product. The United States Department of Agriculture (regulates meat products, poultry products, and egg products) does not allow protein containing ingredients to be hidden under the collective ingredient name of natural flavor. Rather, protein containing ingredients must be included in the ingredient list by their common or usual name.

#### **Smoke Flavoring**

This flavoring is derived from burning various woods, including hickory and mesquite. Barley malt flour may be used as a carrier for the captured "smoke." Some manufacturers list the sub-ingredients of the smoke flavoring used in their products; others do not. I recently came

across a salsa product that included smoke flavoring. The ingredient list read, "natural smoke flavor" (contains organic malted barley flour). Typically, I don't consider salsa a likely place to find gluten but this is a good example of why it really is important to always read the ingredients list of any processed food!

### Alcohol-Based Extracts

There is no reason to avoid flavoring extracts, such as vanilla extract because they contain alcohol. The alcohol in these products is distilled and pure distilled alcohol is gluten free regardless of the starting material. Remember, during the process of distillation the liquid from fermented grain mash is boiled and the resulting vapor is captured and cooled. This causes the vapor to become liquid again. Because protein doesn't vaporize there are no proteins in the cooled liquid.

### Caramel

According to the Food and Drug Administration, caramel is a color additive made from heating any of the following carbohydrates: dextrose, invert sugar, lactose, malt syrup, molasses, starch hydrolysates and fractions thereof, and sucrose.

In other words, caramel color may be derived from barley or wheat. However, I have never come across any manufacturer information indicating that caramel was derived from malt syrup. In the U.S. caramel is typically made from corn. In Europe it may be made from wheat. BUT caramel color, regardless of what it is made from probably is an ingredient you don't have to worry about.

Why? According to DD Williamson, the largest manufacturer of caramel color in the U.S., cornstarch hydrolysate is the most likely source of caramel when the ingredient is made in the U.S. In their plants in Europe, DD Williamson uses wheat as their source of caramel.

However, if a food product regulated by the FDA includes caramel containing protein from wheat, wheat must be listed on the food label either in the ingredients list or Contains statement. Nonetheless, even if a food manufacturer in the US uses wheat-derived caramel imported from Europe, the caramel is unlikely to contain much in the way of intact protein. This is a highly processed ingredient.

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