

American Pie: The Covingtons and Thrashers of South Kihei

By Robyn Russell
Photography by Christopher Douglass Photography

Paleo, Atkins, The Zone, fat-free, sugar-free, Mediterranean, the ketogenic: there's no doubt that Americans are drawn to culinary trends—and if there's one dietary craze that's taken the country by storm in recent years, it's going gluten-free. Sales of gluten-free products exceeded fifteen billion dollars last year. South Park devoted an episode to the issue. Jennifer Lawrence—she of *The Hunger Games* fame—received major flack when she dubbed GF “the new, cool eating disorder.” Those who have tossed the wheat in favor of sorghum and potato assert they're never felt stronger, and Twitter abounds with gluten-free jokes and recipes in equal measure.

But the necessity of embracing a gluten-free lifestyle is neither a passing fancy nor a laughing matter—particularly for the Covingtons and Thrashers of South Kihei.

While living on the Big Island, Terry Covington—a contractor and Georgia native—endured a terrifying spell, riddled with severe symptoms, that left his doctor's head spinning. When no known cause made itself known, Terry began researching possible culprits on his own.

The year was 2011—a time when gluten-free was little more than a whisper and a mystery to most people. Research findings in hand, Terry insisted on getting tested for Celiac Disease—an autoimmune disorder that afflicts roughly three million Americans and results in a flood of disturbing, even fatal symptoms, from intestinal distress and cognitive difficulties to the very sort of rash—dermatitis herpetiformis—Terry had been dealing with for months. His wish for an exam was granted, but not before his doctor made him promise that he would, for the love of God, stop playing MD on Google.





As he suspected, Terry tested positive for the genetic disorder and promptly started connecting the dots. His mother had passed away from kidney disease; his grandmother, liver (the kidneys and liver are just two organs radically affected by gluten). He'd been suffering from elusive symptoms for years. And his underweight son, Derek, had long turned away from starchy foods (it was his body's way of telling him that he would have an adverse reaction, his mother and Terry's wife Leanne says). When it became clear that their other son, Chad, had Celiac as well, the family discovered the key to their well-being and longevity: booting gluten from their diets.

The force and necessity of this endeavor may have been there—and their efforts were ultimately fulfilled—but it proved to be difficult. Gluten, a gummy protein found

in barley, rye, and, most notably, wheat, is found in a cornucopia of products beyond bread, from soap and salad dressings to beer and chocolate sauce. And while Terry and his sons began to find enormous relief in going gluten-free, eating out was a less than stellar experience.

Enter Maui. Having moved to the Valley Isle through a job with his brother-in-law, Terry Thrasher (Leanne and Terry's daughter Katrina's husband), Chad had his parents come visit him in Maui in February of 2012. While here, the family yet again learned that dining out within their dietary requirements was nothing short of challenging.

The Covingtons took matters into their own hands and decided to build a gluten-free restaurant—one that would dispel the myth that GF is synonymous with bland and tasteless and, more importantly, offer a haven at which Celiac Disease sufferers and gluten-sensitive people could eat in delectable peace.

It may have been a pipe dream for most but a quick glance at the family's past suggests it wasn't only plausible but also inevitable: Terry Covington, whose first job was at Shakey's Pizza in San Jose, was a master builder with over two decades of experience under his well-worn (tool) belt. Chad holds an ASS in Culinary Arts from the University of Hawai'i and worked as a chef on the Big Island for nearly half a decade. Terry Thrasher has long held a career in the beverage biz. And Leanne—who has since gone gluten-free too—wasn't just a former medical assistant at Kaiser, special education assistant at WHEA (a charter school on the island of Hawai'i), and a Ministry Assistant at Grace Community Church, she was also, well, a mother of three.

The charismatic Ohana put their brains and skills together—and fast. Leanne and Terry relocated from the Big Island to Maui in June of 2012, received the keys to their then-empty restaurant on July 2, and, by September 18th, had their labor of love, Maui Brick Oven, up and running.



And just this past year, the Food Network's Guy Fieri selected the cozy venue for his wildly popular *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*...

"We feel it is our ministry to help those with gluten issues have a safe place to eat," Leanne says of their restaurant, which, located next to Longs in North Kihei, took over Domino's lease. "We're also trying to show that gluten-free food can be made in a way that everyone—gluten-free or not—will enjoy it."

To that end, the family has worked tirelessly at honing their menu and perfecting guest relations. They had "a lot of pizza parties" in preparation of their opening, turning tastings into family affairs with Katrina, Katrina and Terry's daughters Kayla and Faith, and Chad's wife, Chelsey (who is expecting her first child). They're one of the few restaurants in the country to have a wholly gluten-free kitchen (what few beers with gluten they serve, for example, are poured into a disposable cup) and they're endlessly eager to share their in-depth understanding of Celiac Disease and gluten-free options with their patrons.

The rest of the island—nay, the nation—has taken note. The pizzeria has received a Certificate of Excellence from TripAdvisor every year since 2014. *Maui Time* named it the second best place for pizza on the island, no matter that their



Guy Fieri deemed Maui Brick Oven's fish and chips the best he'd ever tasted.



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crust's ingredients depend entirely on wheat's alternatives. And just this past year, the Food Network's Guy Fieri selected the cozy venue for his wildly popular *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, an event that inspired the larger-than-life TV personality to declare that Maui Brick Oven's fish and chips (which are encrusted with a gluten-free batter designed by Chad, who serves as the restaurant's executive chef) the best he's ever eaten—thereby reinforcing the Covington's original vision and broadening their concept of the future (the family is presently in negotiations for a bigger space).

Part of that future for Terry, who works as MBO's pizza chef and books it to the beach in the (albeit scant) time he has away from the restaurant, involves charity—namely, utilizing his skills as a builder to construct homes and schools in impoverished and disaster-stricken areas around the world. As for Leanne? She involves herself in her work with her church and plans to spend more time with her art, which are joyful pieces that capture the spirit of Hawai'i.

In the meantime, however, the family has their hands full and, underscoring the whole ethos of *Dhana*, come together to keep their lives, inside and outside of the kitchen, in working order. Faith is learning culinary skills from her uncle Chad. Kayla works in the front of the house as a hostess and server. Leanne serves as MBO's front end manager; Katrina works the floor. And while Derek—formerly with the U.S. Navy—lives in California with his wife Jenna and daughter

Rebecca, he's certainly there in spirit. In other words, if food is the language of love, this South Maui family is beyond fluent—and living a life of abundance. ✱



Leanne and Terry's beloved pups, the aptly named Chewy and his brother Samson.

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