



Todd with mum Jo, who developed gluten-free classics such as hot dogs so he didn't miss out.

Jo Williamson

While her husband has always been in the food industry, Jo Williamson, 49, spent a large part of her life as a psychiatric nurse.

"My work stories were pretty interesting," she laughs. "In that job you deal with things that make most people's toes curl."

It may seem odd that she went from mental health to food marketing for her husband's Christchurch-based company Golden Goose (producers of frozen fast food). But Jo says it's a natural progression: "It's all about what makes people do what they do, whether that be psych patients or supermarket consumers."

Jo enjoyed promoting the business and, with young kids, the flexibility was perfect. Everything was going swimmingly until four years ago when her son Todd, then 12, fell ill with severe abdominal pain.

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would happen. He eventually got down to 39kg and was admitted to hospital."

Todd was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, where there is thickening and inflammation of the gastrointestinal tract resulting in poor absorption of nutrients and therefore dramatic weight loss, abdominal pain and fever.

"As any mother will testify, seeing your child so sick is the worst feeling ever," says Jo. The hospital wanted to put him on immune suppressant medication but as a nurse, Jo could not bear the thought and looked at other solutions. "I decided a combination of orthodox and alternative treatment was the most powerful answer so we worked with a naturopath."

The naturopath suggested a radical diet overhaul may help, and he was right. Todd recovered over time and, despite concerns of what Crohn's can do to growth, is now a strapping 1.9m. Jo and Brent couldn't be more pleased. One of the things off the menu was gluten. It seemed a cruel twist of fate for Todd that his parents owned a company making party food. Tuna and rice instead of hot fish and chips just didn't cut it. Like all good mums, Jo sought a solution, developing a gluten-free version of Kiwi classics such as fish and chips and hot dogs for Golden Goose to sell.

"It took 12 long months," she says. "There was some pretty appalling gluten-free stuff on the market and I didn't want to add to it!"

They trialled their products at the Gluten Free Food and Allergy Show in Christchurch and were blown away by the feedback. One 33-year-old had the first doughnut of his life and was dumbfounded. A coeliac (someone with a permanent gluten intolerance) from an early age, he'd never eaten classic treat food before. "Now I see what all the fuss is about!"

And so the gluten-free treats range was born.

"We don't make this food for everyday consumption," says Jo. "It's just that fish and chips on the beach or a hot dog on a stick at an A&P show are rites of passage for Kiwi kids and there's no reason why some should miss out."

Since then demand has been huge. Now they must move onto the next stage - expansion.

"Who'd have thought that a fearful day in hospital with a very ill child would result in this?" says Jo. "I never thought we'd end up with a healthy normal teenager and a successful business. Just goes to show, doesn't it?"

