



well-being health



Ancient grains are back in vogue, for good reason, writes **Catherine Saxelby**.

G rains – once the mainstays of modern diets – have fallen into disrepute in recent years, due to criticisms of their over-refinement (think sliced white bread, white rice) as well as sniping from fans of no-carb and wheat-free diets.

In contrast, ancient grains such as quinoa, spelt, buckwheat and wild rice have many nutritional benefits. They offer good levels of protein, which is handy for the rising number of vegetarians and vegans and their need for quality plant-protein sources. They're also rich in fibre, along with a broad spectrum of B vitamins, vitamin E, minerals (notably phosphorus, magnesium, copper and manganese) and antioxidants.

Many are also gluten-free. Even the ancient varieties of wheat and barley, which contain gluten, seem better tolerated by those with sensitive digestions and wheat intolerance. In any case, they're a better bet than most pre-prepared gluten-free foods, which are often refined, low-fibre, high-GI (glycemic index) – and expensive.

Most of these old-school cereals come in wholegrain form, which includes the outer fibrous bran and nutrient-dense germ. Eating wholegrains regularly helps to keep your digestive tract in fine order, assists with weight management, and reduces the risk of chronic diseases such as type-2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke. Here are some to try at home:

OATS

Oats are known as a superfood for their rich content of a fibre known as beta-glucans, which helps to drive blood cholesterol down. They offer more protein and fat than wheat or rice and have a low GI.

How to eat it: Cooked into porridge for winter breakfasts. I make a killer crumble by combining oats with unsalted butter, brown sugar and cinnamon. Sprinkle thickly over stewed apple and rhubarb and bake.

BARLEY

One of the oldest cultivated grains, barley is a close relative of wheat and rye. It was one of the first grains cultivated as a staple food in ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. These days, most of the barley crop is used to make malt for the production of beer and whisky.

Barley is an outstanding source of the trace mineral selenium – a critical antioxidant and immune booster – with generous quantities of other minerals, notably magnesium, phosphorous and manganese. Barley also stands out due to its low-GI status, making it useful for staving off hunger pangs and steadying blood sugar levels.

How to eat it: I love pearl barley in soups – just a handful is enough to thicken and enliven a soup. It also works well in vegetarian dishes (think pilafs, casseroles and hearty salads) or in risotto. For carnivores, barley is divine with slow-cooked beef.

BUCKWHEAT

Having Polish parents, I would see buckwheat (kasha) featuring often on our family dinner table. My mum cooked it up like brown rice – sautéed in butter with onion and mushrooms, then simmered in a rich beef stock. Those dark-brown buckwheat crêpes from Brittany, in France, are another favourite.

How to eat it: Look for toasted darker buckwheat groats, as they have a lot more flavour than the green (raw) type.

RYE

A hearty grain, rye grows well in climates such as those in Scandinavia and Russia, where it's too cold for wheat to thrive. It has less gluten than wheat and its gluten is less elastic, making rye breads heavier, denser and healthier for our teeth and stomachs. Rye also provides unusual phyto-compounds called lignans and phenolics, which can protect against certain cancers, and is high in fibre and vitamin B1 (thiamin) and B3 (niacin).

How to eat it: Rye bakes into delicious dark breads and crispbreads and is sometimes mixed with wheat – you get the flavour of rye with the lightness of wheat. I often team it with herring, smoked trout, borscht and goulash.

WILD RICE

This staple grain of the native Americans grows on tall aquatic grasses in slow streams and lakes along the US/Canadian border, particularly around the Great Lakes. Its slender grains impart a lovely nutty flavour, and the dark-brown pigments are anthocyanins, compounds that function as antioxidants.

How to eat it: On its own it can be overpowering, so mix with long-grain brown rice for an interesting texture (both take about 45 minutes to cook). I love it as a stuffing for roast chicken and as the basis of a salad with corn, broad beans, red onion and coriander.

QUINOA

Pronounced keen-wah, this trendy grain has moved from health-food shops to supermarkets in the past year. It cooks quickly and can be substituted for couscous, bulgur or rice in pilafs, salads, soups and side dishes.

It has an exceptional nutrition profile, being packed with low-GI carbs and fibre, along with B vitamins and minerals such as zinc, phosphorus, magnesium and potassium. It's also gluten-free. It's a must for vegans, thanks to its complete amino acid (protein) rating.

How to eat it: I love the beige quinoa for its mild, delicate flavour but there are also red-brown and black types, which are crunchier. Start with one cup of quinoa to two cups of water or stock. Rinse, then cook for 12 or so minutes until all the liquid has been absorbed.

Nutritionist Catherine Saxelby is co-author of Ancient Grains: Whole-food Recipes for the Modern Table (Arbon Publishing, \$35).

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