

Unconventional grains



Believe it or not, “whole grain” and “whole wheat” are not synonymous—there’s a world of grains out there that most Americans haven’t even heard of, let alone used. But if you’re serious about living a whole-grain lifestyle, these are the ones that you should know about.

Wheat: It’s the chief crop of America’s breadbasket. When you first embark on a healthy lifestyle, whole wheat—that which hasn’t been shorn of its fibrous outer bran or its nutritious inner germ—becomes a key component of your meal plans. And with good reason: Widely available, whole wheat readily fills the hole in your diet where all that junky refined stuff once resided.

So it’s not like we’re dismissing whole wheat. But just as your body craves wholesome nutrition, your taste buds eventually crave change.

And that’s when you discover a whole other world of grains that we only think of as “unusual” because they aren’t used much here in the US. “Ancient foods, once discarded on the road to progress, have come back into vogue,” writes chef Robin Asbell in *The New Whole Grains Cookbook* (Chronicle Books), going from staples of traditional cultures to centerpieces of fine cuisine. To get to know these grains a little better, turn the page.

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Buckwheat

History: Not related to wheat at all despite the name, this mineral-rich Eastern European favorite actually originated in China.

Basic Cooking Instructions: Use two cups of liquid for each cup of grain and cook for 15 minutes.

Culinary Uses: A traditional breakfast favorite (think pancakes), it also makes a superb side dish called *kasha* and an intriguing stuffing ingredient. Buckwheat is boldly flavored, so you may want to mix it with milder grains.



Bulgur

History: Ancient Mediterranean peoples discovered that boiling and drying wheat before husking helped preserve it; we now know that this process also upped the nutrition value.

Basic Cooking Instructions: Use 1.5 cups of liquid for each cup of grain and steam for 10 minutes.

Culinary Uses: Can be used in baking and makes a tasty pilaf instead of the usual rice; its subtly nutty flavor goes well in fruit dishes.

Amaranth

History: Valued for both its seeds and its leaves, amaranth was a staple grain for the Aztecs, who offered it in tribute to their emperor Montezuma; it's still an important crop in Central America as well as southern Asia.

Basic Cooking Instructions: Use 2.5 cups of liquid for each cup of grain and cook for 25 minutes.

Culinary Uses: In addition to use in baked goods and skillet dishes, these tiny seeds can be popped and mixed with honey for a Mexican-style treat.



Barley

History: One of the oldest grains under continuous cultivation, barley is best known in this country as a beer ingredient; it's now prized for having the lowest glycemic value of any grain.

Basic Cooking Instructions: Use two cups of liquid for each cup of hulled grain and cook for an hour after soaking overnight.

Culinary Uses: Traditional Scottish cuisine paired barley with mutton or lamb; it also makes a good addition to vegetable casseroles.



Millet

History: Grown in Africa and Asia for thousands of years, where farmers appreciated its ability to grow under the driest of conditions; it was a staple grain in China long before rice.

Basic Cooking Instructions: Use 2.5 cups of liquid for each cup of grain and cook for 20 minutes; can be toasted or sautéed beforehand.

Culinary Uses: Millet works beautifully in flatbreads, puddings and polenta-type dishes.

Rye

History: Another Eastern European favorite, rye was valued because it could tolerate both cold temperatures and poor soil.

Basic Cooking Instructions: Use three cups of liquid for each cup of grain and simmer for 45 to 60 minutes (overnight soaking reduces the cooking time).

Culinary Uses: Rye is best known for making a rich, flavorful bread (in addition to a strong alcoholic brew) but it also works well in dumplings and cold salads.



Quinoa

History: What amaranth was to the Aztecs, quinoa was to the Incas—a staple grain held in high spiritual regard. It still plays an important dietary role in western South America.

Basic Cooking Instructions: Use two cups of liquid for each cup of grain and cook for 15 minutes. The raw grain has a bitter gray coating; either wash it in cold water until the soapiness is gone or buy it prewashed.

Culinary Uses: A tasty substitute for brown rice, quinoa's easy digestibility also makes it a good baby-food ingredient.

Spelt

History: An ancient form of wheat, this hearty grain was a European staple for hundreds of years.

Basic Cooking Instructions: Soak for at least eight hours; then cover with liquid to a depth of two inches, simmer for 20 minutes and let stand for an additional 30 minutes.

Culinary Uses: May be substituted for whole wheat in recipes; just keep in mind that spelt bread won't rise as high as wheat flour and will produce firm loaves.



Note: Whole grains and flours have a limited shelf life. Use them within a month or store them in the refrigerator.