



## BUCKWHEAT

Let me introduce you to the 'Queen of All Grains', at least that is what people have been calling buckwheat since the last couple of decades.

The plant is hardy, well adapted to a wide variety of soils and climates. It grows very fast, producing seeds in about 6 weeks and reaching some 750 mm high. Although commonly known as a cereal, buckwheat is a broadleaf crop of the same plant family as rhubarb or sorrel, and doesn't belong to the grass family like the 'true' cereal does.

The flowers have 5 petals arranged in spikes and panicles. Bees love these fragrant flowers whose nectar yields a dark and strongly flavoured honey. The grain of buckwheat has a unique triangular

shape and special milling equipment is needed to remove the outer hulls. The grain colour ranges from tan to pink or brown.

The wild buckwheat is native to Manchuria and Siberia. For many centuries it was a vital food source for the inhabitants of those cold mountainous regions where the climate is too cold, the soil too poor and the land too limited for growing rice. Soon, it was domesticated, spreading to Europe via Russia and Turkey in the 14th-15th centuries and introduced in the United States by the Dutch during the 17th century. The name 'buckwheat' is supposedly derived from the Dutch word *bockweit*, meaning 'beech wheat', reflecting the plant's beechnut-like shape and wheat-like characteristics.

Buckwheat production peaked in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The main consumers and producers today are countries of the former Soviet Union.

Commercially, buckwheat is available either raw or roasted. Raw buckwheat has a soft, subtle flavor, while roasted buckwheat has more of an earthy, nutty taste. Buckwheat food products are marketed as whole groats, cracked groats, or as a coarse granular product. These products are used for breakfast food as well as thickening materials for soups, casseroles and gravies.

Buckwheat flour is available in either light or dark forms, the darker variety being more nutritious due to the presence of hull fragments not removed during the milling process. Buckwheat flour makes nice pancakes, a real treat, especially for those allergic to wheat. However, beware, some pre-mixed buckwheat flour may contain wheat, corn, rice or oat flours and a leavening agent, make sure you read the list of ingredients in the packet if you are on a wheat and gluten free diet.

The most renowned of all buckwheat food is *kasha*, a porridge/risotto-like specialty of Russia, and *blini*, the Russian pancake. Buckwheat noodles are a specialty of Japan. The leaves of some wild species are cooked as a vegetable in North China and in Tibet (and probably elsewhere too). They are also eaten as a salad, resembling sorrel.

Buckwheat contains *rutin*, a medicinal chemical that strengthens capillary walls, reducing hemorrhaging in people with high blood pressure and increasing microcirculation in people with chronic venous insufficiency. Dried buckwheat leaves for tea were manufactured in Europe under the brand name "Fagorutin", believed to have some medicinal attributes.

In recent years, buckwheat has been used as a substitute for other grains in gluten free beer. It is used in the same way as barley to produce malt that will brew a beer suitable for gluten intolerant drinkers.

Now that you have finished reading this article, you will understand why such a fancy title for such an uncommon food. For some reason, the reputation of buckwheat was rather biased from the beginning – it was considered a 'poor man's' food. However, things have changed, especially now more and more people have discovered they are gluten intolerant and are looking for gluten free grains.



The seeds are tiny and of triangular shape