

## Oats

‘Mares eat oats and Does eat oats’, that’s how the old saying goes.

But time has changed! Oats now feature significantly in the human diet.

We know very little about the history of oats. In the early days of agriculture, wild oats appeared as weeds among cultivated wheat and barley crops, they did not easily lend themselves to domestication; their single wild grass contains single small grains atop small seed heads, which drop off on ripening in the manner of a weed.

Most authorities believe that our present cultivated oats developed as a mutation from wild oats. They think this may have taken place in Asia Minor or south-eastern Europe. When wheat and barley spread westwards into cooler and wetter areas, this favored the wild oat, leading to its eventual domestication. Cultivated strains were soon developed to ensure the plants keep their seeds longer enabling easier and longer harvesting. Oats grow well in moist, temperate to cool climates and will thrive in conditions which wheat or barley would not even tolerate. Now, there are more than twenty varieties of cultivated oats.



Until late in the 19th century, oats was a basic food mainly in Scotland and Wales, in other parts of the world, the majority of crops produced were fed to animals. In Samuel Johnson's dictionary, oats were defined as “eaten by people in Scotland, but fit only for horses in England”. The Scotsman's retort to this is “That's why England has such good horses, and Scotland has such fine men!” The increase in oat consumption among human, especially in North America, can be credited to American Ferdinand Schumacher who developed quick cooking rolled oats, and Henry Crowell who packaged the product under the retail brand name ‘Quaker Oats’. Today, most of us would agree that oats make the best porridge of all grains.

Confused about all the different kinds of oats that are sold in the market? The following information might help.

**Raw Oats:** This is oats newly harvested, before the kernels (groats) are separated from the hulls and stalks.

**Whole Oat Groats:** A groat is another name for a grain kernel. Whole oat groats are simply raw oats, cleaned and removed of their inedible hulls. They take the longest to cook.

**Steel Cut Oats:** If you cut groats into two or three pieces with a sharp metal blade, you get steel cut oats. They cook faster than oat groats, because water can penetrate the smaller pieces more easily. Steel cut oats are sometimes referred to as Irish oatmeal.

**Scottish Oatmeal:** Instead of cutting oats with a steel blade, the Scots traditionally stone-grind them, creating broken bits of varying sizes – which, according to some, makes a creamier porridge than steel-cutting oats.

**Rolled Oats:** are created when oat groats are steamed and then rolled into flakes. This process stabilizes the healthy oils in the oats, so they stay fresh longer, and helps the oats cook faster, by creating a greater surface area.

**Quick Oats** (or instant oats): If you roll the oat flakes thinner, and/or steam them longer, you create quick oats and ultimately instant oats. The nutrition stays the same (these are all whole grains) but the texture changes – a plus for some people and a drawback for others.

**Oat flour:** is simply the ground grain. Such flour may be used in a variety of baked goods, such as oatcakes, oatmeal biscuits, and oat bread.

In recent years oat bran has received considerable attention from the medical community. Nutrition experts believe that Beta glucans, the water-soluble fibers present in oat bran inhibit cholesterol, which helps prevent heart disease. They also recommend increased daily intake of fiber, such as that in oat bran, because it assists in regulating gastro-intestinal function.

In Britain oats are occasionally used for brewing beer. Oatmeal stout is a very drinkable brew.

Another common use of oats is for livestock feed, specifically horses and cattle. Oats are also used in some brands of dog and chicken feed. In early days, oat straw was used to stuff mattresses. Now, it can be used for beddings for horses and cattle, due to its soft, relatively dust-free, and absorbent nature.

In the cosmetic industry, oat extract is used to make skin lotions and beauty soaps, as oatmeal is believed to provide good nutrients to the skin. An oatmeal bath, made by adding a cup of finely ground oatmeal to one's bathwater, is commonly used to ease the discomfort associated with eczema, sunburn, dry skin etc.

**A stomach full of oatmeal:** Oats feature in many dishes from porridge to breakfast cereals, biscuits and bread, but their most famous presence perhaps is in ‘haggis’, a dish that specifically celebrates Scottish culture, some even says it is the Scottish national

dish. Haggis consists of a large sheep stomach stuffed with minced offal, oatmeal, fat and spices. This dish was made famous by the poet Robert Burns in his poem ‘Address to a Haggis’ which is recited during Burns night, a celebration of the poet’s birthday with ‘Haggis’ on the menu.

**Anzac Biscuits:** We Australians are proud of our Anzac biscuits which feature rolled oats as the essential ingredient.

