

QUINOA (pronounced 'keen-wah')

Genus: *Chenopodium* Family: *Amaranthacea*

Looking for a new healthy food to add some variety to your diet? Then check out quinoa, an ancient South American seed much prized by the Incas.

Quinoa's origin is truly old. The plant comes from the Andes Mountains and was one of the three staple foods, along with corn and potatoes, of the Inca civilization. The ancient Incas called quinoa the 'mother grain' and revered it as sacred.

Botanically speaking, quinoa is not a true cereal grain; it is the seed of the *Chenopodium* or Goosefoot plant, a relative of beets, chard and spinach. The plant grows 1 to 2m high and has many angular branches. It will grow in a variety of conditions but does best in a cool, arid climate, at higher elevations. The flower heads are branched, and when in seed, look much like millet, with large clusters of seeds at the end of a stalk. The leaves are lobed and often triangular in shape. The grains range in color from ivory to pink, brown to red, and sometimes black. They are similar in size to millet but are flat with a pointed oval shape. There are over 120 species



in the genus, but only three main varieties of the quinoa species are cultivated: the white or sweet variety produces very pale quinoa; the dark red-fruited variety produces red quinoa; and the black variety produces black quinoa.



Cooked grains have little spiral tails

Quinoa has a delightful characteristic that is all its own: as it cooks, the outer germ around each grain twists outward forming a little white, spiral tail, which is attached to the kernel. The grain is soft, fluffy and the tail is crunchy, this combination creates an interesting mixture of creaminess and slight crunchiness. The edible leaves make a pleasant vegetable or a salad.

Quinoa is gluten free and light and easy to digest. It is not sticky or heavy like most other grains. One can substitute quinoa for almost any grain in almost any recipe. It looks good and tastes great in a variety of dishes. Cooked quinoa is excellent added hot to casseroles, soups, stews, stir-fries, or cold in salads. Uncooked seeds may be added to soups and stews as you would barley or rice; quinoa is often substituted for rice in rice dishes. Quinoa flour is used in making pasta and a variety of baked goods such as pancakes, bread, muffins, and crackers. Quinoa seeds can be sprouted and eaten raw in salads and sandwiches. Another fascinating way of using quinoa is to 'pop' the seeds in a dry skillet and eat them as a dry cereal.

Quinoa grain contains more protein than any other cereal grain; unlike wheat or rice, which are low in lysine, quinoa is more like oats, containing a balanced set of all 8 of the essential amino acids required by the human body to aid digestion. It also provides starch, sugars, oil, fiber, minerals, and vitamins.

In its natural state, quinoa is unpalatable as it has a coating of bitter-tasting saponins. Most quinoa sold commercially has been processed to remove this coating. This bitterness has beneficial effects during cultivation, as the plant is unpopular with birds and thus requires minimal protection.

While relatively new to many parts of the world, quinoa has been cultivated in the Andean mountain regions of Peru, Chile and Bolivia for thousands of years, and has long been a staple food in the diets of the native Indians. When the Spanish conquerors came to South America, they attempted to control the native Indians and their culture by destroying the fields in which quinoa was grown and making it illegal for the natives to grow quinoa, with punishment including sentencing offenders to death. With these harsh measures, one would expect the cultivation of quinoa to be all but extinguished. Yet, this super food did not and would not be extinguished forever. In the 1980s, two Americans, discovering the concentrated nutrition potential of quinoa, began cultivating it in Colorado. Since then, quinoa has become more and more available, as people soon realized that it is a beneficial as well as a delicious food.

Today, it is heartening to find quinoa food readily available, not only in specialty shops but also in almost any ordinary suburban supermarket.