

Want to Try Something New? Get Keen on Quinoa!

By Steve Baldwin, MS, RD, Associate Editor

When it comes to whole grains, I thought I had heard of them all. Barley, millet, bulgur, wheat. Cracked wheat, wheat berries, rolled oats, oat groats. Amaranth for goodness sakes. And then there was quinoa.

“What in the world is queen-oh-ah?” I asked my dietitian friend who suggested I try it. “It’s pronounced keen-wah,” she replied. Turns out quinoa is a nutritional powerhouse, packed with such high levels of nutrients, it makes other grains green with envy. It’s the rare plant food (similar to soy beans), that provides a complete protein – one that contains all essential amino acids, the building blocks of protein in our bodies. Quinoa is roughly 16% protein, compared to 8% for rice and 10% for millet.

Compared to wheat, quinoa has about the same amount of fiber and 9 times the amount of iron. It’s an excellent source of folacin, magnesium, phosphorus, riboflavin, and zinc. Perhaps most importantly, it tastes good. It’s delicate taste and light flavor allows it to be substituted for other grains.

Quinoa has a rich historical heritage. The Incas, a native population who thrived in South America between 1200 and 1500 AD, believed the crop to be sacred. Quinoa was referred to as "chisaya mama" or "mother of all grains". When Spaniards discovered and conquered South America in the mid 1500’s, quinoa crops were actively suppressed, due to their elevated status within Incan traditions. Despite efforts to squelch quinoa crops, the plant survived in remote areas and has been actively cultivated since. A plant that thrives in difficult growing conditions, quinoa grows in dry, mountainous terrain. While most quinoa is imported from South America, it is also cultivated on the high slopes of the Colorado Rockies.

Quinoa’s durability may be attributed to a thick, bitter coating that discourages predators from eating its seeds while providing cover from the bright sunlight at high altitudes. This coating, called saponin, is removed to make the grain palatable; store-bought quinoa should be rinsed to remove any saponin residue. Rinse the grain through a strainer until the water runs clear, then drain well.

Cook quinoa by simmering ½ cup grain with 1 cup of water, cooking until the grains are translucent and the germ (the inside of the grain) spirals out like a tail from each grain. This should take about 15 minutes. If you have a rice cooker, you can steam quinoa as well.

Mix quinoa with vegetables and your favorite seasonings, or try it plain like couscous. Add tuna, chicken, tofu, or beans to quinoa and chopped vegetables – carrots, onions, garlic, and red bell peppers. Quinoa can be mixed into rice pudding, or cooked in fruit juice for a unique dessert. Try cooked quinoa with honey, almonds, and berries for a hearty breakfast.

Trying different foods within each food group can help provide your body with the balance of nutrients it needs – and you may even learn how to pronounce a new word along the way.