

# ANCIENT GRAINS

What on earth are ancient grains, and why are we scouring the globe for them?

Text by Tiffany Chan, photos by Samantha Sin  
Special thanks to city'super, Just Green and Spicebox Organics

Legend has it freekeh dates to 2300 BC, when an ancient Mediterranean city's crop of young, green wheat was burned under siege. The villagers salvaged the wheat by rubbing off the scorched chaff and realised the grain underneath was not only edible, but rather delicious. 6,000 years ago, kamut was a staple grain in the Nile hinterland, but was lost until a passionate wheat farmer from Montana rescued it from extinction in the 1970s.

Ancient grains may be a recent addition to the modern vocabulary, but the crops themselves are nothing new. The term is vague and often problematic, but loosely refers to grains that have remained largely unchanged, such as quinoa, sorghum, teff, millet, barley and black rice. They are grains with stories.

Modern wheat is not the same as the wheat our ancestors ate thousands of years ago. Punam Chopra, owner of speciality food store Spicebox Organics, explains: "Ancient grains have been cultivated unchanged since the beginning of agriculture; grains that have not changed by cross breeding or through genetic modification."

While the stories behind the grains' origins are compelling, their health benefits are a significant part of the appeal, says Kelly Touns, programme manager at Whole Grains Council in the US.

"Many people have a general understanding that our modern food system isn't exactly setting us up for nutritional success," she says. "Unlike refined white flour, ancient grains are left largely intact, often maintaining all parts of the original kernel [bran, germ and endosperm]. This means they offer the health benefits of whole grains. Many

whole grains, such as teff, amaranth and millet, are naturally gluten-free and their popularity has paralleled the rising interest in gluten-free cuisine."

As more and more people are becoming dissatisfied with the products of industrialised farming, they are looking to ancient civilisations and monocultures for alternatives.

"India has been steadily consuming grains like amaranth, sorghum and millet, and Africa and other European countries also consume spelt and teff. With globalisation and information available via technology, and more occurrences of intolerance in digestion, more and more people are gaining access to these grains and are happy to experiment to improve their diet," Chopra says.

The biggest success story so far has been quinoa. In the past five years, it has appeared on restaurant menus, in health stores and supermarket aisles the world over. A seed marketed as a "super grain", quinoa is loaded with protein, fibre and amino acids. But in the past two years, articles have appeared trumpeting new super grains: "Sorghum is the New 'Wonder Grain'," or "Move over Quinoa, a New Superfood Grain is in Town". In the National Restaurant Association's 2016 Culinary Forecast, ancient grains were named a top-15 food trend.

For Ethiopia-born Helina Tesega of Eat Ethio, there's nothing trendy about ancient grains.

"Teff has been used in Ethiopia for thousands of years. For us, it's not an ancient grain, a superfood, or gluten-free; it's been engrained in our culture for thousands of

years. It's what our sisters ate, what we eat every day," she says. "Growing up, we loved it. I didn't love it because it has fibre or calcium. We knew it was healthy, because that's our source of nutrition."

**For Tesega, there are obvious advantages to popularising so-called ancient grains: a newfound appreciation for traditionally neglected cultures ("It changes the story for Ethiopia, doesn't it?"), economic growth and more diversified diets. But she doubts the benefits will outweigh the risks. Sustainability, first and foremost, is a concern. High demand from overseas is driving up prices and making these ancient staples too expensive for people in countries that traditionally relied on them.**

"I worry about it being sustainable, if the demand is so high," she says. "[People] in Bolivia and Peru cannot afford to eat quinoa anymore – that was the source of nutrition for them in their diet in the way teff is for us. People who chase 'superfoods' always have more choice. If teff is not found today, they can go to sorghum or millet for nutrition. But other countries don't have this, that's why they're called ancient grains, because it's been used for years and years."

As wonderful as it is that we are becoming more health-conscious, Tesega warns there is another side to the story, too.

"Thirty years ago, people used to think, Ethiopia doesn't have food, we need to feed Ethiopia. But now, they find out that we in Ethiopia not only eat every day, but we eat a superfood, too. And now Ethiopia is going to feed the world gluten-free, superfood products. It's ironic, isn't it?" ■

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## 1. COUSCOUS

A North African staple, couscous is not a grain, but coarsely ground granules of semolina flour. Technically a pasta, it can be cooked and eaten as a grain. With little flavour of its own, couscous soaks up flavours easily and is a great accompaniment for vegetable and meat dishes. It is delicious simply tossed with herbs, lemon zest and toasted pine nuts.

## 2. SORGHUM

Originally from Africa, sorghum appeared some 8,000 years ago in southern Egypt. Largely neglected in the West where it was mostly fed to animals or used for packing materials, lately it has been popping up on restaurant menus everywhere. Versatile and eco-friendly, sorghum takes a third less water to grow than corn. It is gluten-free and rich in antioxidants and proteins.

## 3. BARLEY

One of the oldest cultivated grains, barley was a staple in ancient Egypt (mummies have been found wearing barley necklaces), Greece and Rome. With about 17 per cent fibre, it is said to be the most fibrous whole grain. There are two common varieties: hulled barley and pearl barley. For the first, the outer husk is removed but the bran layer is left intact; for the second, both husk and bran are removed. Today, barley is mostly used to make malt whisky and beer. Try using pearl barley in a risotto or to thicken a soup.

## 4. FARRO

Originating in ancient Egypt, farro is also known as emmer or pharaoh's wheat. Emmer wheat was one of the first strains to be domesticated in the Middle East's "fertile crescent" and was later served as a staple to the Roman legions before being replaced by durum wheat. Today, farro is commonly used in Italy to make quality pastas and risottos.

## 5. QUINOA

In the past few years, we have grown to know and love quinoa. Native to the Andes, and cultivated in Central and South America for more than 5,000 years, quinoa was considered sacred by the Incas, and translates as "mother" in Quechua Indian. Slightly crunchy, fluffy, gluten-free and nutritious with all nine essential amino acids, it's no wonder quinoa has become so popular in salads and stews.

## 6. AMARANTH

Amaranth was a staple crop of the Aztecs until Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, intent on conquering the civilisation, put a stop to growing the crop. When cooked, the tiny kernels resemble small brown beads with a robust, peppery flavour. It's a popular street snack in South America, where it is popped like corn. It is high in protein and gluten-free.

From left: city'super cous cous \$25/500g, city'super pearl barley \$17/500g both from city'super; Bob's Red Mill sorghum \$45/680g and Bob's Red Mill farro \$65/680g both from Just Green; organic amaranth grains \$48/500g from Spicebox Organics; Ancient Harvest Inca red quinoa \$86/340g from city'super

## 7. BULGUR

Called arisah in the Bible by ancient Babylonians, Hittites and Jews, bulgur has been a staple for thousands of years and is often called Middle Eastern pasta. Made from pre-cooked wheat berries, its nutty, chewy texture makes an ideal substitute for meat in dishes such as burgers or meatloaf. Its relatively low glycemic level makes it a good rice or pasta substitute for those watching sugar levels.

## 8. BLACK JAPONICA RICE

Black japonica rice was first cultivated in China, where it was traditionally considered the finest rice and reserved solely for the emperor, hence its nickname "forbidden rice". The dark, long-grain rice is mixed with mahogany rice and turns a dark, metallic purple after cooking. With a hearty, chewy interior, the rice is slightly sweet, nutty and earthy, and since its recent introduction to the US it has quickly won a following.

## 9. MILLET

No, it's not birdseed. Newly trendy in the West, millet played a prominent role in early Chinese agriculture. Dating back almost 7,500 years in north China, it is still a staple in Asia and Africa. Naturally nutty, crunchy and nutrient-rich, millet comes in numerous varieties, including pearl, foxtail, proso, finger and fonio. Gluten-free, it can be ground into flour.

## 10. BUCKWHEAT

A "false grain" that is neither a grain nor wheat, buckwheat is a fruit seed closely related to rhubarb. Originating in northeast Asia, it was first cultivated as early as 6000 BC and was one of the first crops introduced to America from Europe. High in protein, this versatile crop is used for buckwheat galettes in France, buckwheat soba in Japan, and kasha varnishkes in Russia.

## 11. WHEATBERRIES

Wheatberries are the whole-grain form of wheat before any refinement or processing. Wheat flour, for instance, is made from milled and ground wheatberries. Containing gluten and the nutritional content of a whole grain, wheatberries give a crunchy texture to dishes. To cook, wheatberries must be simmered in a pot of water over low heat for 60 to 90 minutes.

## 12. TEFF

A reliable, resistant staple in Ethiopia for thousands of years, teff is used in Ethiopia's beloved sour and spongy flatbread, injera. Its name is derived from the word *teffa*, which means "lost" in Amharic. Resembling fine poppy seeds, the tiny size of the world's smallest grain makes it impossible to separate the bran, germ and endosperm. Teff comes in three colours and the flavour ranges from mildly sweet to a chocolate-like earthiness.

From left: city'super bulgar wheat \$25/500g and Lundberg black japonica rice \$48/454g both from city'super; Bob's Red Mill organic teff \$98/680g from Just Green; city'super organic raw buckwheat \$28/500g, city'super organic millet grain \$28/500g, Bob's Red Mill hard white wheat berries \$26/907g all from city'super