

## Foodie Freak: Quinoa, not just for Incas anymore

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 Sunday, 15 June 2008  
 Last Updated Sunday, 15 June 2008

Quinoa, pronounced &ldquo;KEEN-wah,&rdquo; was the second-most important of the three primary foods of the Incas, the first being the potato and the third being corn. It was so valuable to them that they called it &ldquo;The mother of all grains.&rdquo;

In the ancient Incan equivalent of throwing out the first pitch at a baseball game, the ruling monarch ceremoniously planted the first quinoa every year with gardening equipment made of gold. Modern marketers call quinoa &ldquo;the supergrain of the future.&rdquo;

Well, let&rsquo;s not get our hopes TOO high. If you want to get really technical quinoa isn&rsquo;t a grain, but a seed of a plant related to the weed goosefoot. White or &ldquo;sweet&rdquo; quinoa is the most common, but there also is red and black quinoa available.

Quinoa has a bitter seed coating called saponin that protects it from being eaten by birds while out in the field. In modern commercial processing this is rinsed off before sale, but the Spaniards arriving to the New World didn&rsquo;t do this, and so ended up not liking the taste of quinoa. As a result, potatoes and corn made it back to Spain from the newly discovered Incan lands, but quinoa was shunned as &ldquo;Indian food.&rdquo;

Later, when the Conquistadors became horrified with the violent and bloody Incan religious sacrificial practices, anything Incan became taboo. All writings were burned and native foods were forbidden, sending the discovery of quinoa into obscurity.

This is a shame since quinoa has been a food for over 3,000 years. Had these exploring Europeans been able to distinguish the good things from the bad of Incan customs and culture and not &ldquo;throw out the baby with the bath water,&rdquo; this amazing food would be as widely appreciated today as corn is.

Although I think the Incas were probably lacking registered dietitians they sure knew their stuff! Quinoa is nearly a perfect food. It has an average of 16.5 percent protein, it&rsquo;s full of balanced amino acids (lysine, methionine and cystine), calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, iron, fiber (45 percent of your daily value on average per serving), starch, sugars and linoleic acid; it is gluten free AND kosher.

When it comes to nutritional benefits this grain kicks the butts of rice, wheat, corn, barley and millet (not that millet is on many pantry shelves). It is low in saturated fat and cholesterol. One cup serving of uncooked quinoa provides 36 percent of your daily carbohydrates and 43 percent of iron, and 626 calories (93 from fat, 437 from carbohydrates). If you are on a fixed income then you need quinoa; it will provide you a healthier meal for less money.

Quinoa is available at several Lake County grocery stores. It&rsquo;s inexpensive and easy to cook. I&rsquo;ve found quinoa cooked with water rather plain, so I cook it in chicken stock/broth, and then upon serving I add a pat of butter. The basic recipe is one part quinoa to two parts liquid.

Quinoa typically cooks in 15 minutes, but the really cool part is that it actually TELLS you when it&rsquo;s done. The grains swell up, become translucent, and the germ ring pops out adding a &ldquo;springy&rdquo; look to the grains. You can also prepare quinoa in the microwave or rice cooker.

In my efforts to make sure I give you as much information possible, I decided to experiment with the idea of growing quinoa sprouts. I enjoy growing my own sprouts and have a countertop sprouter set, but I hadn&rsquo;t tried quinoa sprouts before.

So I put a teaspoon of the seeds into my seed sprouter and watered them. I used the very same ones that I bought from the grocery store to cook, no special ordering needed. Twelve hours later the seeds had already started to grow.

If you choose to sprout your own quinoa keep them in a sunny window since the more sunlight they get the more nutritious they become. Although the initial sprouting occurred quickly, after three days I didn&rsquo;t have a very impressive crop of sprouts, but they are beautiful, being green, white and purple.

Flavor-wise the sprouts are delicious; it was reminiscent of childhood when I would nibble on fresh clover out in a field. For those of you who didn&rsquo;t spend your childhood as a cow in the Midwest, a better description would be a fresh vegetable taste almost like mixing raw asparagus and cucumber. Quick side note: Always water with fresh clean water, as reusing the water in the bottom of the sprouter set hastens fermentation.

The sprouts have even more nutritional benefits than cooked quinoa, which are already very high. This makes quinoa even more versatile. The sprouts are reported to be higher in vitamins and minerals than plain cooked quinoa, are cleansing for the heart and arterial system, and reduce fat in the blood stream.

Raw food enthusiasts and vegans use quinoa to replace the protein they are lacking from meat. They have many creative uses for quinoa including making banana and quinoa sprouts breakfast drinks, and dehydrating quinoa sprouts and sprinkling them over other foods for extra nutrition. Some pet food companies are even putting quinoa sprouts into pet food.

You can make your own gourmet BLT sandwich by substituting prosciutto for the bacon and quinoa sprouts for the lettuce, but keep the tomato. Put them on some toast with mayo and you have yourself a super-nutritious gourmet sandwich.

The seeds will remain viable for about two years if stored in an airtight container. The sprouts have a maximum shelf life of about two weeks if stored in the refrigerator. If you don&rsquo;t keep the sprouts in the refrigerator they can ferment, and yes, there is quinoa beer out there. There are even recipes available online for cooked quinoa sprouts. Gee, maybe this is the supergrain of the future.

Not only does quinoa produce a grain-like seed, sprouts and beer but there also is quinoa flour and quinoa pasta. You

can &ldquo;pop&rdquo; quinoa seeds like popcorn, but in a dry skillet. Then add milk and eat it like breakfast cereal. Due to quinoa&rsquo;s high fat and oil content it should be stored in the refrigerator to keep it from going rancid. I personally don&rsquo;t store mine in the fridge, because I use it up way before it has a chance to go bad.

So with the nutrition, ease of cooking, variety of methods and historical significance you have no reason NOT to get this ancient Incan superfood on your next shopping trip. Come on try it, it&rsquo;s not like I&rsquo;m asking you to sacrifice your enemy on an altar and eat his still-beating heart.

Quinoa, it&rsquo;s not just for Incas anymore.

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