Whole Grains 101

By now, we know that whole grains are good for us—but how many of us know what they are, how to choose them and how to cook them? Lou Sackett offers a primer to help you sort through all the unfamiliar names and find products that your family will enjoy.

August 22, 2006 By Lou Sackett

Whole grains are among our most ancient foods, and there was a time when just about all the grains people ate were whole. Real grains are the seeds of grasslike plants. Each of these seeds comprises a starchy “endosperm,” an oil- and protein-rich “germ,” and a fibrous outer coating called the “bran.” Our ancestors simply boiled these grains in water to make a nourishing porridge or ground up the grains into coarse flour for making hearty, healthful brown breads. However, with advances in technology, we began to polish off the bran and remove the germ to make smoother, paler products from the endosperm—mistakenly thinking that whiter was better. It turns out that the grain’s germ is packed with important nutrients, and the bran is a great source of vegetable fiber. “Eating whole grains—more than one serving daily—reduces hunger between meals, reduces the risk of diabetes, lowers blood pressure and cholesterol levels and therefore reduces the risk of stroke and heart disease,” says Lisa Hark, MD, coauthor of The Whole Grain Diet Miracle (DK Publishing; $25) and host of TLC’s popular show Honey, We’re Killing the Kids. “Those who eat whole grains regularly also have reduced risk of colon cancer.”

Whole grain breads and cereals also have a rich, nutty flavor and a satisfying, chewy texture that wimpy, white processed foods can’t match. But beyond brown rice, most of us are in unfamiliar territory when it comes to buying and preparing them. Expand your culinary horizons by trying these whole grains easily found in health food stores or in the natural foods section of your supermarket.

Barley
Description: Resembles wheat berries, though usually lighter in color
Other forms: Barley flour, barley flakes and pearl barley (outer hull is removed)
Flavor: Rich nutty taste
Nutritional benefits: Excellent source of selenium and copper; high in fiber, boosts intestinal and colon health
To cook: Rinse thoroughly, and add one part grain to three and a half parts water or broth. Simmer pearl barley one hour; simmer barley with outer hull for 90 minutes.
To serve: Use as a tasty base for stews; add brown sugar for a hot cereal dish; in baking, mix barley flour with wheat flour.

Buckwheat
(when roasted, it's called kasha)
Description: Light-brown, triangular-shaped seeds
Other forms: Buckwheat groats (the cracked grain); buckwheat flour
Flavor: Unroasted grains have a mellow, subtle, earthy flavor; kasha has a deep, toasty-nutty taste.
Nutritional benefits: Rich source of antioxidant flavonoids that also boost vitamin C; high in magnesium, a mineral that stabilizes blood sugar levels and helps to prevent diabetes; gluten-free
To cook: Simmer one part grain in two to three parts water or broth for 30 minutes (groats require less liquid).
To serve: Toss with sautéed mushrooms and whole wheat bowtie pasta; top with low-fat milk, and drizzle with honey for breakfast; in baking or pancakes, replace up to half wheat flour with buckwheat flour.

Bulgur
Description: Whole wheat kernels that have been boiled, dried and cracked; available coarse, medium and fine
Flavor: Mild and wheaty, like homemade bread
Nutritional benefits: High in fiber, protein and nutrients; cooks quickly and is easily digested
To cook: Simmer one part bulgur in two parts water for ten minutes, or soak in hot water for 20 minutes.
To serve: Mix hot bulgur with cooked diced chicken breast and/or sautéed vegetables; toss cool bulgar with scallions, cucumbers, tomatoes, parsley, lemon juice and olive oil for a refreshing salad, or serve as a hot breakfast cereal.

Millet
Description: Tiny, round, yellow seeds
Other forms: Millet flour
Flavor: Slightly sweet, lightly nutty
Nutritional benefits: One of the least allergenic and most digestible grains; high fiber, nearly 15% protein, high in B-complex vitamins, rich in phytochemicals (believed to lower cholesterol and associated with reduced cancer risk)
To cook: For millet pilaf, simmer one part grain in three parts water for 25 minutes, or soak overnight, then steam for 30 minutes; for a creamy millet cereal, simmer one part grain in six parts water for 45 minutes; dry
roasting before cooking adds a rich, toasty flavor.
To serve: Replace rice with millet pilaf as a bed for curries and stir-frys; simmer into a stew with meats and/or vegetables; mix cooked grain into meatloaf or burgers; in baking or pancakes, replace up to one-third wheat flour with millet flour.

Quinoa
(pronounced "keen-wah")
Description: Tiny, flat, oval seeds, usually creamy white; when cooked, the germ detaches from the kernel in a tight spiral

Other forms: Quinoa flour
Flavor: Mild and lightly nutty; tender texture with crunch from the germ
Nutritional benefits: High in protein, calcium and iron; contains an almost perfect balance of all eight essential amino acids constituting a “complete” protein (especially valuable in vegetarian diets); low sodium content; gluten-free
To cook: Rinse thoroughly to remove any “sudsy” bubbles, then simmer one part quinoa in two parts water for 15 minutes; to sprout, soak overnight and place between damp paper towels in a sunny window.
To serve: Replace rice with quinoa as a bed for stir-frys; add to soups and stews; toss cold cooked quinoa with crunchy vegetables and vinaigrette dressing; add quinoa sprouts to salads.

Spelt
Description: Large, light-brown oval grains with a lengthwise indentation
Other forms: Spelt flour; also spelt pasta and spelt bread
Flavor: Earthy and nutty
Nutritional benefits: Excellent source of vitamin B-2, shown to help reduce the frequency of migraine headaches; high in niacin, which lowers cardiovascular risk factors; extremely high in fiber
To cook: Soak overnight, then simmer one part grain in eight parts water for one hour.
To serve: Use as a side starch or as a bed for hearty stews; replace rice with spelt in preparing risotto; use spelt flour in place of whole wheat flour in baking.

GOING WITH THE GRAIN
Try these delicious recipes for starters

Cherry-Almond Bulgur Breakfast Bowl
Makes 1 serving

- ⅔ cup medium bulgur wheat
- 1 pinch salt
- 2 tbsps dried cherries or other dried fruit
- 1 tbsp honey
- 1⅓ cups boiling water
- ¼ cup toasted sliced almonds or other nuts
- ¼ cup low-fat yogurt

1. In a cereal bowl, mix together the bulgur, salt, cherries and honey. Stir in the boiling water, and cover the bowl with foil. Let stand 15 minutes.
2. Stir in the nuts, and top with yogurt.

Per serving: 564 calories, 20 grams fat, 1 milligram cholesterol, 124 milligrams sodium

West African Millet Stew
Makes 4 servings

- 1 ½ cups chopped onions
- ¼ cup minced fresh ginger

1 tbsp minced garlic
4 tbsps vegetable oil
½ tsp cayenne powder
¼ tsp ground cinnamon
1 pinch ground cloves
1 cup millet
6 cups water
¾ tsp salt
3 cups pumpkin or winter squash, large cubes
1½ cups potatoes, large cubes
1 cup diced red bell peppers
1 cup peeled, diced tomatoes
¼ cup peanut butter
1 10 oz package cleaned spinach
1 tsp freshly ground black pepper

1. In a large saucepan, sauté the onions, ginger and garlic in the oil until soft. Add the spices, and sauté a few seconds more. Add the millet, and stir over low heat to coat the grains with the seasonings; then add water, salt, pumpkin and potatoes. Simmer briskly, stirring occasionally, for about 30 minutes until the millet is almost tender.
2. Add the peppers and tomatoes. Simmer 15 more minutes until all the vegetables are tender and the liquid is reduced to a light sauce.
3. Stir in the peanut butter, then add the spinach and stir over low heat just until wilted. Adjust the salt and season with pepper.

Per serving: 490 calories, 24 grams fat, 0 milligrams cholesterol, 151 milligrams sodium

Wild Mushroom Farrotto With Grilled Chicken

Makes 4 servings

4 tbsps olive oil (total)
½ pound fresh wild or domestic mushrooms, wiped clean and sliced
1 tsp salt
½ cup chopped onions
1 tbsp minced garlic
2 cups whole spelt, kamut or farro (soaked in water overnight and drained)
½ cup dry white wine (optional)
1 qt sodium-free chicken stock, simmering
1 to 1½ qts water, simmering
½ cup grated Parmesano-Reggiano cheese
1 10 oz package cleaned arugula
4 5 oz boneless chicken breasts, seasoned and grilled
2 cups sodium-free light tomato sauce

1. Heat 2 tablespoons olive oil in a sauté pan, and sear the mushrooms with a pinch of salt until browned. Set aside. In a heavy saucepan, sauté the onions and garlic in the remaining oil until soft. Add the soaked grain, and sauté one minute, then add the wine.
2. Stir over moderate heat until the wine is absorbed, then stir in 1 cup of hot stock and the remaining salt. Simmer, stirring frequently, until the stock is absorbed. Continue adding stock 1 cup at a time until the stock is used up, then continue similarly with the hot water until the grain is tender and the mixture is almost dry. Stir in the mushrooms and their liquid. Remove from heat and stir in the cheese.
3. Scatter the arugula onto four dinner plates, leaving space in the center. Spoon the farrotto into the center of the plates. Top with the chicken breasts, and spoon the sauce over top.

Per serving: 527 calories, 31 grams fat, 83 milligrams cholesterol, 199 milligrams sodium

Lou Sackett is a freelance food writer and culinary educator based in South Central Pennsylvania. She is the coauthor of American Regional Cooking for the Professional Chef (Prentice Hall; $50).

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