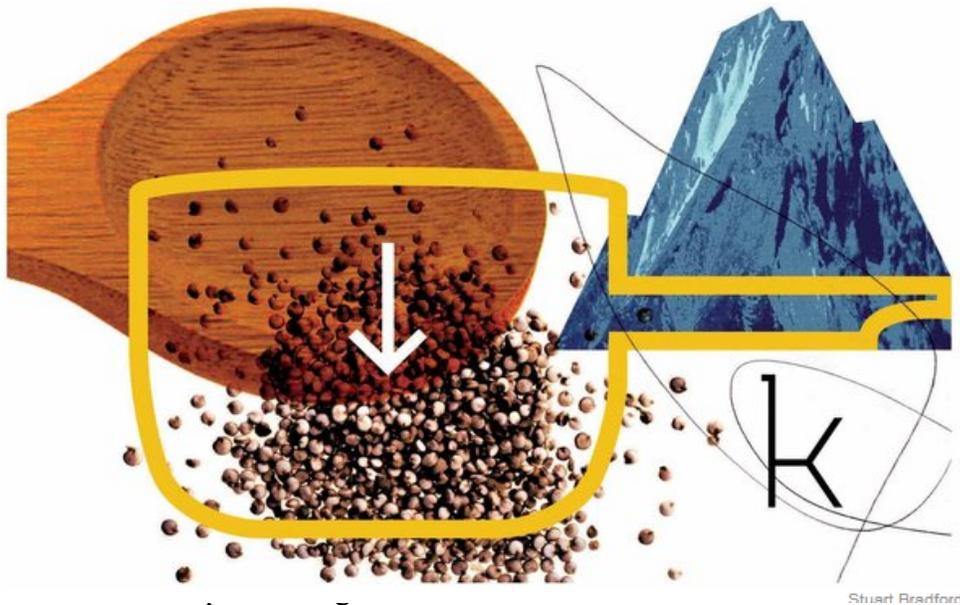




THE WELL COLUMN

5 Things to Know About Quinoa

By TARA PARKER-POPE APRIL 14, 2014, 5:23 PM 72 Comments



Stuart Bradford

This week, a new food is appearing on Passover tables around the country. The Orthodox Union, the authority on kosher foods, recently ruled that certain brands of quinoa could carry its “Kosher for Passover” symbol.

“Passover is a more limited diet,” said Rabbi Menachem Genack, chief executive of O.U. Kosher. “If you can increase the universe of foods that can be used, people are really happy about it.”

The decision to make some quinoa kosher is the latest boost to the venerable plant, which has surged in popularity in recent years as a high-protein, vegan and gluten-free food. Here are five things to know about this healthful food.

WHAT DOES QUINOA TASTE LIKE?

Quinoa is an ancient food from South America. While it looks a bit like rice, it has a richer, heartier flavor and crunchier texture. Dietriffin.com describes the taste as “brown rice crossed with oatmeal” that is “fluffy, creamy, crunchy and somewhat nutty, all rolled into one.” Stonesoup calls it “something a little like barley with its chewiness,” combined with a “a light fluffiness akin to well-prepared couscous.”

Not everyone is a fan. A Vancouver Observer columnist recently listed “five reasons to hate quinoa,” including that some types of uncooked quinoa have the translucent appearance of silica gel, and that it tastes like “beige.”

WHY IS QUINOA SUDDENLY SO POPULAR?

While quinoa seems to have become fashionable overnight, its rise has been years in the making. In 1913, The New York Times reported that quinoa was among 400 “charming botanical strangers” to be introduced in the United States by the Department of Agriculture. Food writers have been talking about its nutritional quality and taste since the 1980s, but it remained primarily a niche health-store product.

Quinoa’s popularity stems from its reputation as a “complete” food. It has a protein content of about 15 percent, and a balance of important amino acids, magnesium, calcium, and other minerals and vitamins. In 2008, Oprah Winfrey embarked on a 21-day “cleanse” diet that included quinoa with mushrooms, herbs and garlic as comfort food. Retailers like Costco, Trader Joe’s and Whole Foods also began to carry and promote quinoa.

Quinoa imports began to surge around 2008, doubling from 2006, according to the Whole Grains Council. **Datamyne reports that the United States imported about 25,000 metric tons of quinoa in 2012, up from**

about 5,000 in 2008.

In 2010, a cookbook, “Quinoa 365: The Everyday Superfood” by Patricia Green and Carolyn Hemming, became a best seller. The United Nations labeled 2013 the International Year of Quinoa, and recipes using quinoa are now a staple of food blogs and cooking columns.

“Even though it seems like overnight, there hasn’t been one single event that has catalyzed the popularity of quinoa,” said Kevin Murphy, an assistant professor of barley and alternative crop breeding at Washington State University. “When we started doing quinoa research, people would laugh. Nobody knew what it was.”

HOW DID QUINOA BECOME KOSHER?

Rabbi Genack said the Orthodox Union was divided about the question.

During Passover, leavened foods that contain wheat, barley, rye, spelt or oats are forbidden. (The tradition stems from a historical anecdote: When the Jews escaped Egypt, they didn’t have time to let their breads rise before going into the desert.)

Quinoa is not a grain; it’s actually more closely related to beets and spinach. But foods that may be confused with grain or grown near wheat fields may not be deemed kosher.

To make its decision about quinoa, the union sent a rabbi to the Andes Mountains in Bolivia to investigate how and where quinoa is grown. He found that it was not grown near wheat, and the union decided to allow certain Bolivian quinoa products to carry its kosher endorsement.

HOW DO YOU COOK QUINOA?

Quinoa can be cooked like rice or boiled vigorously like pasta. Home

cooks and food writers experiment with different methods, depending on whether they want a crunchier or creamier texture.

Martha Rose Shulman, who writes the Recipes for Health column in The New York Times, said she recently reduced the amount of water she uses to cook quinoa. “The grains were tighter and less moist than quinoa cooked in abundant water, and the yield was not as great because the grains don’t swell as much,” she wrote. “But I liked the results.”

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF QUINOA?

Most quinoa eaten in the United States comes from South America, where farmers are eager to cultivate the plant because of rising prices. (Some llama herders are reported to have switched to quinoa farming because it is more lucrative.)

The Department of Agriculture has awarded a grant to researchers at Washington State who are studying ways to help farmers grow quinoa. Currently, 35 varieties are cultivated in the United States, and scientists are trying to determine the best growing conditions.

In one study, researchers are trying to determine if quinoa plants are more resistant to certain insects than wheat and barley are. “Not a day goes by that I don’t get five or six emails and calls from farmers asking what seeds to plant or how to grow it,” Dr. Murphy said.

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