

QUINOA: MOTHER GRAIN OF THE INCAS

by George Meinig, DDS

Quinoa (pronounced Keen-wah) is a small seed somewhat in the nature of sesame seeds or millet. The commercial variety is pale yellow in color but some of the species are white, a beautiful pink, orange, red, even purple or black. It cooks quickly as a cereal in 15 minutes, has a somewhat nutty flavor and a slightly crunchy texture that seems to melt in your mouth.

Quinoa has been a staple food to the natives of the South American Andes since 3000 B.C. The ancient Incas held it sacred, calling it "the mother grain." These people, although physically stressed by living at high altitudes, had phenomenal stamina, strength and mental ability. Quinoa is felt to contribute to these attributes because its protein is significantly higher than all the principal grain foods.

In addition, its lysine and methionine are generously supplied and help balance the protein requirements of vegetarian diets, usually low in these two essential amino acids. Also, Quinoa is high in calcium, iron, phosphorus, the B vitamins and vitamin E.

Although Quinoa is thought of as a grain, this annual herb is technically a fruit of the chenopodium family. The seed clusters like millet at the end of a stalk that grows three to six feet high. It grows well at altitudes and can thrive on little water but does not do well in areas where the temperature exceeds 90 degrees.

My interest in this food was sparked some years ago when I was advised that it stimulated breast milk production in mothers who were having trouble producing a sufficient supply for their babies. At that time, the only way I knew how to obtain it was to go to Peru.

The Rodale Test Kitchen staff found Quinoa substituted well for other grains in a variety of recipes. They liked it in place of rice in rice salad, for millet in a souffle and for barley in mushroom-barley soup.

During cooking, it expands three times its size. If 10 to 20 percent of the ground Quinoa flour is mixed with wheat flour in making bread and biscuits, a lighter, more nutritious loaf results. It is a pleasing addition to salads, soups, and other foods.

Peru's Quinoa is proving to be a delicious taste treat that fits well into Americans' current love affair with gourmet foods.