

Taking the Intimidation out of Cooking with Whole Grains

Whole Grains are gaining increasing popularity due to their high nutritional value, low Glycemic Index and economic value. From a Traditional Chinese Medical perspective, whole grains supply us with foundational level “Qi” (energy) which helps us in all categories of health and life; grains sustain us.

The 2005 Dietary Guidelines recommend at least 50% of our daily grain consumption come from whole grains. However, many of the products on market shelves labeled “Whole Grain” have little true whole grain value.

A whole grain is made of three layers – the bran, germ and endosperm. In order for a product to be a true whole grain product, it must include the grain in its natural form (meaning all three layers of the grain are intact) or equal proportions of each part of the grain (for example: 1/3 bran, 1/3 germ, 1/3 endosperm of the same grain).

The best way to ensure you are consuming whole grains is to cook the actual grain. This simply means buying a grain in its natural, unprocessed form. There are many to choose from. Some examples include: brown rice, quinoa (pronounced “keen-wa”), millet, amaranth, barley, oats or kamut (pronounced “kah-moot”).

Many whole grains are delicious as side dishes or in place of your rice and pasta. Oats, barley, millet and medium brown rice can be used as binders in meatloaf or meatballs instead of bread crumbs.

As Americans, however, we have little exposure to whole grains and even less experience cooking with them! As a result, we are often daunted by purchasing whole grains, no less incorporating them into our daily routine. Cooking grains in their natural form is quite easy, just a little time consuming. A helpful hint when cooking grains is that most absorb the flavors they are cooked with or in. Even if you don’t like the flavor of the plain grain, the consistency is what matters; if you like the consistency of the grain, and not the flavor, combine it with your favorite foods and flavors.

So, if it is so easy, how do you cook them? It’s simple...with water. All grains must be rinsed before cooking. After rinsing, boil, then simmer in water; add a little salt, if desired. Each grain has a different water-to-grain ratio and cooking times vary from grain to grain.

To get you started, here are a few examples: brown rice has a 2 ½:1 ratio, meaning use 2 ½ cups water for every one cup of rice and cook 50 minutes; millet (no salt needed) 2:1, 2 cups water for every one cup millet and cook 15 minutes; quinoa 2:1, 2 cups water for every one cup quinoa, cook 12 minutes; kamut (must be presoaked for 6-8 hrs.) 3:1, 3 cups water for every one cup kamut, cook 45 minutes.

You can also cook them in vegetable or chicken stock to add to or change their flavor. Really, any liquid can be used to cook grains.

Whole grains meet many of our daily nutritional requirements, reduce the chance of heart disease and stroke, and help control blood sugar levels. Yet whole grains are an almost non-existent part of our diet. With so many benefits, it's worth taking the time to become acquainted with whole grains and begin incorporating them into your daily routine.

Chris Oliveri, Personal Chef and Jewel Sommerville, Doctor of Acupuncture, at Holistic Health Rhode Island (HHRI), offer cooking lessons, lectures and seminars on Whole Grains and other related health topics. HHRI is located at 5835 Post Road, Suite #113, East Greenwich, RI 02818; 401.398.2933; www.holistichealthri.com; www.worldsfarechef.com.