

Food & drink Word of Mouth blog

From freekeh to teff: five ancient grains you could add to your larder

Looking for an interesting substitute for rice or pasta? Here, experts, including Yotam Ottolenghi, reveal how to get the best out of some underused but versatile grains



Freekeh ... 'slightly addictive' Photograph: anne murphy / Alamy/Alamy

Johanna Derry

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Whether its teff or freekeh or something else completely unpronounceable, announcements of the “new quinoa” keep coming so thick and fast, it can be hard to keep up with how to say, let alone cook with them. But their popularity is based on something more substantial than linguistic bragging rights. There are claims that they’re better for us than modern grains, and chefs love their versatility and flavour. Michael Marriage of [Doves Farm](#), has been growing ancient grains such as spelt since 1978, way before it was even vaguely cool. “There’s been a phenomenal interest in older varieties recently,” he says. “Many people tell us they find these historic grains are more digestible.” Go-to chef for all things grain-related, Yotam Ottolenghi, agrees. “They’re a very cheap way to eat well. A lot of these grains are great for those looking for an alternative to white pasta or rice or who’re keeping an eye on their intake of wheat.”

The fact that they’re easy to use is another reason for their appeal. “They have such variety,” says Tomar Amedi, head chef at [The Palomar](#), a Soho restaurant serving “the food of modern day Jerusalem”. “They can absorb flavours and elevate taste but they’re also really healthy.” Ottolenghi loves the versatility: “They’ve enough going on flavour- and texture-wise to allow for a very simple

...they're enough going on in our own cuisine that to show us a very simple dish to suffice," he says, "but they're also happy to be paired with very robust flavours such as preserved lemon skin, sharp barberries, or piquant sumac, if you want to scale things up and produce something big and bold." It's the much-parodied quinoa that arguably brought ancient grains to our attention, there are plenty more to play with: Incan and Aztec grains like amaranth and millet, and other Middle Eastern grains such as maftoul and mograbieh, as well as jireesh, einkorn, khorasan kamut and sorghum... Feeling overwhelmed? Panic not; Here's the lowdown on five of the best grains around

Barley

It's not a grain you'd necessarily think of as being ancient, and it definitely doesn't have a strange name. A staple for centuries, it's never really dropped off the radar of our global diet and is the world's fourth most grown grain. But don't let familiarity breed your contempt: it is its versatility and nutritional value that have kept it so high in the rankings. "I use barley a lot," says Ottolenghi. "It's one of my favourite grains to use because it absorbs flavoured liquids very well."

How to use it: "It's very light and fluffy which allows you to use it with quite heavy ingredients and it still keeps the dish light. I often use it alongside a meat like oxtail," Ottolenghi says .

Spelt

Spelt is a cousin of modern wheat and was very common until mechanical harvesting came along and ended 9,000 years of cultivation. It's so ancient it gets a mention in the Bible. Today people love it because the structure of the gluten is shorter and more brittle making it easier to digest. "I love to use pearled spelt when the outer bran layer of these nutty plump grains has been polished off," says Ottolenghi.

How to use it: "Spelt's grassy flavour works really well with fresh herbs and vegetables," says Itamar Srulovich from [Honey & Co](#). "It works really well when you use it as a substitute to rice and cook it as if you were making a risotto."

Freekeh

Pronounced "free-kah", its made from unripe wheat that's parched and roasted to burn off the husks. "The grain has a wonderfully smoky, nutty (and slightly addictive) nature," Ottolenghi says. Amedi agrees: "Freekeh has such a smoky, herbal flavour and it also mixes very well with spices. I use it to accompany chicken dishes and it elevates the whole meal because it is so flavourful."

How to use it: "I use it in all sorts of dishes: a range of salads and pilafs, to bulk out soups or to stuff in birds to be roasted or squid to be braised," says Ottolenghi. "A freekeh pilaf, made from caramelised onions, a good stock, spices and freekeh is a quick and easy supper. You just need to steam it, let it sit and then serve it with a spoon of creamy yogurt."





📷 Teff ... 'a healthy snack.' Photograph: Alamy

Teff

Teff was largely unheard of outside of Ethiopia until it was espoused as the new nutritional superfood by the famous and fabulous (think Gwyneth Paltrow, Victoria Beckham, and Sting). “It’s the smallest grain in the world, the size of a full stop at the end of your sentence,” says Sophie Sirak-Kebede [owner of Tobia Teff](#), a UK company specialising in the grain. Though tiny, Teff is gluten-free powerhouse, rich in calcium, protein, vitamin C, and iron, its tough hull trapping its nutritional goodness inside.

How to use it: “Traditionally, teff is baked into injera, a sourdough flatbread,” says Sirak-Kebede. “But brown teff baked into bread makes something similar to pumpernickel. Or you can simply bake it into flapjack with honey, for a healthy snack.”

Quinoa

A Guardianista favourite, quinoa is packed with minerals, protein and good fats, and most importantly for coeliacs, no gluten at all.

“Quinoa is one of my favourite grains,” says Ottolenghi. “I love to pair it with very colourful ingredients - slices of pink radish or crushed pink peppercorns, or bright green podded soy, broad beans and slices of ripe avocado - and strong flavours also work very well with quinoa: chopped preserved lemon skin or peppery watercress, for example.”

How to use it: “Either cook it like pasta: put it into boiling water for nine minutes, refresh it under cold water and then leave it to dry before adding it to any number of salad dishes,” suggests Ottolenghi. “Or cook it as you would oats for a porridge, so that the grains totally collapse. Mix it through with crumbled feta and serve it with some chargrilled cherry tomatoes and a drizzle of basil oil. I’d be happy to eat that any time of the day.”

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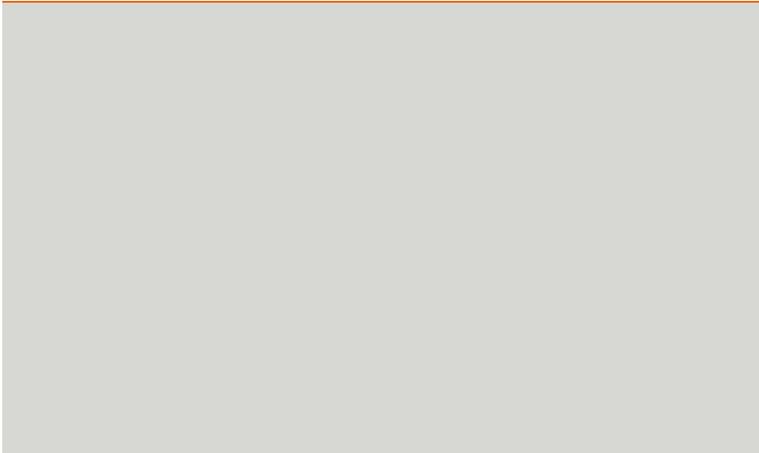
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