

fresh ideas

G r a i n s



Feast BBQ extracts juice from the grain sorghum, cooks it down so it's like maple syrup, and then drizzles that over its Pork Cakes.

Great Grains

Quinoa's breakout leads operators to seek other grain options. By Barney Wolf

The importance of grains in the food we eat every day can't be underestimated. Consider the cereals and bagels we consume for breakfast, the breads and buns in sandwiches at lunch, or the noodles and rice that can accompany dinner.

Now many limited-service restaurant operators are moving beyond menu items made with white wheat flour, white rice, and corn to use more wholesome grains—including some that are popular in other parts of the world—in their menus. The result has been an explosion in protein-rich quinoa, a growing number of grain bowls, and the addition of more whole-grain flour products on menus nationwide.

"Quinoa is probably No. 1 in trending grains," says Mike Kostyo, senior publications manager for Datassential, a food industry market research firm. Quinoa's menu mentions, he

adds, are up 350 percent over the past four years, and the grain is on the menu at one in five fast casuals. It's remarkable growth for "something a decade ago most people had never heard of," Kostyo says.

Most of the world's quinoa—red, white, and black—is grown in the Andes, primarily Peru and Bolivia, but now some comes from North America. This year, Ardent Mills introduced Great Plains Quinoa, which is grown on Canada's high plains.

"It's a slightly smaller seed with a unique tan color and unique flavor, as well as snap in the mouth," says Zachery Sanders, the Denver-based company's director of marketing.

Quinoa's adoption at fast-casual restaurants is double the rate of restaurants in general, Datassential reports. These eateries also have added other whole grains as ingredients—wheat, rice, chia, and farro among them—at a faster pace.

"Fast casuals in particular have been pretty quick to adopt whole grains," says Kelly Toups, program director for the Whole Grains Council at Oldways, a nonprofit food and nutrition education organization.

She points to the growth in brown rice since Chipotle added the grain to its menu in 2011. Similarly, most limited-service bakery-cafés offer several whole-grain bread options.

Unlike grains that are refined—think of white rice or white-wheat flour—whole grains include the bran, or outer layer, of the grain, as well as the middle endosperm and the germ. They are rich in dietary fiber and nutrients.

As a result, these grains "are giving us the opportunity to focus not only on taste and texture, but [also] to do wonderful things for nutrition and health benefits," says Patrick Sugrue, chief executive of Saladworks, which features various grains across its menu.

The slow shift away from white rice, a staple in Asian cooking and an integral part of many bowls and burritos at limited-service restaurants, is a perfect example.

"Grains are giving us the opportunity to focus not only on taste and texture, but also to do wonderful things for nutrition and health benefits."

"You ratchet up the health value as you move from white to black rice," Sugrue says. "It used to be exotic to go from white to brown rice, and now we're finding nutritional value moving to red and black rice varieties that are more complex and have great mouthfeel."

Many Asian and Mexican brands already offer brown rice, but it's not limited to ethnic concepts. Culver's, for example, uses both brown and wild rice in its Wild and Brown Rice with Chicken Soup.

In addition to traditional whole grains, many restaurants are adding ancient grains, like quinoa, farro, millet, and kamut, that have changed little over hundreds of years because they haven't undergone selective breeding, as have plants like corn and rice.

There are several reasons for ancient grains' growth beyond nutritional considerations. These include the desire by consumers for natural ingredients, a hunger for food with a story, the need for protein alternatives to meat, and an interest in gluten-free dining.

"Consumers want to feel good about what they're eating, and these ancient grains are not processed a lot, so it fits in the clean-eating trend," Kostyo says.

Gluten—found in wheat, barley, and rye—is on the outs with some diners for health and dietary reasons. "As more people have tried gluten-free diets, many restaurants realized they had to be more creative in the grains they were using," Toups says. To go along with the gluten-free trend, pizza parlors have added gluten-free crusts made with grains like rice, sorghum, amaranth, and buckwheat.

According to Datassential, wheat leads the list of grains that are considered ubiquitous in menu adoption at restaurants, followed by white rice and oats, the latter of which can be found in oatmeal, granola, and other items. Rye and cornmeal are also ubiquitous at restaurants, according to the data.



Great Harvest Bread's Sesame Chicken Garden bowl (left) features toasted wheat and quinoa, while Flower Child's Mother Earth Bowl includes quinoa, farro, and barley.

GREAT HARVEST BREAD, FLOWER CHILD

It's not surprising, then, that bakery-cafés are leaders in using various grains, since they have so much experience in that category. Most feature whole-grain carriers among their baked goods, and a number have experimented with different grains.

Great Harvest Bread Co. uses a variety of whole grains, but the most important is Montana hard red spring wheat, which is milled into flour daily at stores in each market using the entire wheat berry (the kernel minus the hull).

"It's baked into bread within 24–36 hours," says Mike Ferretti, chief executive of the Dillon, Montana-based chain. "It's not parbaked. It is made from scratch by hand daily, and we think that is the real point of difference."

The most popular bread—in loaves and in the café's sandwiches—is Honey Whole Wheat, made with whole-wheat flour, honey, water, salt, and yeast. The High 5 Fiber includes millet and oat and wheat brans, while Superfood has wheat, quinoa, oat bran, and flax. Last year, the company added several grain bowls that have toasted wheat and quinoa. The Sesame Chicken Garden version also features grilled chicken breast, peanuts, cashews, mixed greens, cabbage, carrots, cilantro, sesame seeds, and a miso vinaigrette.

Great Harvest is on the lookout for new grains, as it sees itself diversifying away from just hard red spring wheat, Ferretti says. The company offered a limited-supply bread using European heritage Rouge de Bordeaux wheat, grown by a Montana farmer. The product was a home run during the month it was available, he says, and was so tasty that the company acquired that farmer's entire crop this year in order to offer it at least twice.

Other bakery-cafés also have made grains a priority. Panera Bread, for instance, features cracked wheat, rye, spelt, amaranth, and oats in its whole grain bread, and has several sprouted-grain baked goods, steel-cut oatmeal, and quinoa in salads and bowls.

Quick serves are also adding various whole-grain items to their carriers. Arby's has a whole-grain flatbread, while Jack in the Box has a whole-grain pita. Others, including Chick-fil-A, offer multigrain carriers.

"Multigrain options are not necessarily whole grain, but they are often a step in the right direction," Toups says.

Although Chick-fil-A dipped its toe in the ancient-grain pool by market-testing a Harvest Kale and Grain Bowl featuring quinoa, it decided not to roll out the item nationally, the company says, although it could be considered again later.

Red quinoa is a key ingredient at Flower Child, part of Scottsdale, Arizona's Fox Restaurant Concepts. The chain goes through 100 pounds of the grain weekly at each of its seven restaurants in three states. The ingredient is in a half-dozen items on the menu.

"Quinoa is very high in protein, and we cater to a large vegetarian and vegan clientele looking for a source of protein," says head chef Peder Bondhus. Red quinoa cooks with a better texture than white, he adds, and adds to a dish's aesthetic.

The quinoa, cooked in an oven with water and a little salt and olive oil, becomes the base for the Grains and Greens salad with organic kale and other ingredients. Quinoa, farro, and barley



INSPIRATIONS

Mixt's Zesty Bowl

"Grain bowls are a great example of what Mixt customers crave: convenient, healthy, unexpected combinations. We've grown a sizeable fan base for ancient grains like farro and quinoa since we started offering them in 2015. Next up for us is developing grain bowls with lesser-known grains, like amaranth.

"Mixt offers four chef-created grain bowls (one that changes seasonally) and an option for customers to design their own from a choice of organic farro or quinoa and more than 50 farm-fresh ingredients.

"I created Mixt's best-selling grain bowl, the Zesty, when we first launched. It starts with a base of organic quinoa, topped with organic baby kale that Mixt has delivered daily from farms located near our nine locations in California. Next we add slices of grilled free-range chicken prepared skillfully by in-house chefs. The secret to Mixt's grilled chicken: brining and sourcing ethical product from family farms.

"We then add avocado and sweet oranges to counterbalance the tangy notes from feta and our house-made pickled red onions. Shredded cabbage is added to give you a satisfying crunch with every bite. Basil and mint top it off to bring in a final flourish of fresh, aromatic flavors. A lemon-herb vinaigrette is drizzled over the bowl to amplify what I like to call a 'flavor explosion.'"

—Andrew Swallow
EXECUTIVE CHEF, MIXT

The Players:

- Organic quinoa
- Organic baby kale
- Free-range, grilled chicken
- Feta
- Oranges
- Avocado
- Red cabbage
- Pickled red onion
- Basil
- Mint
- Lemon-herb vinaigrette

are also in Flower Child's top menu item, the Mother Earth bowl, along with a host of vegetables, broccoli pesto, and red pepper miso vinaigrette.

Those three grains are part of a grilled asparagus dish, while the barley and quinoa are also incorporated into soups. The Forbidden Rice bowl features both black pearl and red japonica rice, and brown rice is a side dish. Pitas use whole-wheat flour, and oats are in salads and breakfast parfaits.

"We are always experimenting with grains because we're looking to innovate," says Bondhus, who has also tried grains like spelt and kamut. "There are wonderful grains out there that have been around a long, long time in the world, but just not our region of it."

As the definition of salads has expanded beyond greens to include grains, Saladworks has looked at a number of different varieties to consider for its menu. Its first real entry over two years ago was red quinoa in its Mediterranean Salad, which also has black olives, marinated tomatoes, sunflower seeds, and feta cheese, along with greens.

Now it is adding black and red rice and farro, Sugrue says, which "is a big move for us." In addition, the company is "looking at all the ancient grains to ratchet up the protein, not only for vegetarians, but also for those looking for great taste and texture."

Saladworks, based in suburban Philadelphia, has already given an ancient-grain twist to classic minestrone by adding farro, quinoa, and barley rather than the traditional pasta or rice. Its sandwiches use various whole-grain breads.

Using farro in Italian or Mediterranean dishes makes sense considering the hard wheat grows in central and northern Italy and was first domesticated millennia ago around Egypt. That's at least one reason it's on the menu at New York's Nanoosh. The six-unit Mediterranean chain features farro and quinoa among

the bases for its build-your-own power-food plates.

"We started with quinoa, because it was a great source of protein," says area manager Patrick Malloy. "A couple years later, when we were looking for a hot grain base, we chose farro because it has more fiber than other popular grains and is high in proteins."


Quinoa is by far the most popular. The farro "does better in the winter than summer," Malloy adds.

At Louisville, Kentucky's Feast BBQ, owner and chef Ryan Rogers has come up with uses for sorghum grown in his home state and in Indiana. It's a key ingredient in the two-unit chain's Carolina-style hot vinegar sauce and novel pork cakes.

"Louisville doesn't have a barbecue style, so I wanted to bring a regional one, and Kentucky is a large sorghum producer," Rogers says. "So we decided to use that as a sweetener in the sauce, versus honey or agave or something like that."

The pork cakes—sort of like crab cakes except with pulled pork—employ sorghum as well as green onions, cayenne, and panko crumbs. Sorghum is milled with a special press to extract juice from the stalks. That liquid is then cooked down like maple syrup and drizzled on top of the pork cakes. It "adds an earthiness and depth" to the food, Rogers says, and "makes our hot vinegar sauce terrific."

These days, the big question in grains is which will be the next one to catch fire among consumers and social media. Datassential's Kostyo points out that there are a number that are in the early stages of adoption, including farro, chia, buckwheat, and flax.

"The big winner has been quinoa, but there is a lot of opportunity for other ancient grains," adds Ardent Mills' Sanders. So far, though, there hasn't been a breakout leader. 

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MARK STAVRO
Bunge North America

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