

Cooking with Buckwheat

It is believed that buckwheat was first domesticated in China. Saying it's a grain is a misstatement as it's not really a grain at all. It's actually, technically, a fruit. It's a hardy plant that thrives in poor soil conditions and continues to live through freezing temperatures, droughts and excess rain.

While buckwheat is of similar size to wheat kernels, it features a unique triangular shape. In order to be edible, the outer hull must be removed, a process that requires special milling equipment due to its unusual shape. After the seed has been de-hulled, the inner seed or groat has a light brown or light green coloring and is so soft that it can be easily chewed

Buckwheat is also ground into flour, available in either light or dark forms, with the darker variety being more nutritious. Since buckwheat does not contain gluten, it is often mixed with some type of gluten-containing flour (such as wheat) for baking. In the United States, buckwheat flour is often used to make buckwheat pancakes, a real delight, especially for those allergic to wheat.

100% buckwheat flour makes delicious pancakes. Mixed with wheat flour, buckwheat makes great tasting biscuits, muffins and breads and can be mixed up to 50% with wheat flour for making yeast breads. In Eastern Europe, the groats are toasted and are known as kasha. Commercial food processors mix buckwheat flour with other flours to make pancake mixes, breakfast cereals, breads and turkey stuffing. In Europe, buckwheat groats are used whole in hot cereals and soups. They can also be boiled until they become soft and fluffy and then eaten like rice. The Orient is the largest user of North American grown buckwheat where it's used to make sorba noodles.

Whole grain buckwheat is an amazingly nutritious food. Even though it's protein is relatively low at approximately 11%, the protein buckwheat does have contains the eight essential amino acids and is one of the few "grains" (remember that buckwheat isn't a grain at all) high in lysine. If you use half buckwheat flour with your wheat flour, the buckwheat's amino acids will round out the limiting amino acids in your wheat nicely, giving you a nearly perfect balance of the 8 essential amino acids. This particular balance between half wheat and half buckwheat flour is much more closely aligned to your dietary needs even than lean beef!!! It's also rich in many of the B vitamins as well as the minerals; phosphorus, magnesium, iron, zinc, copper and manganese. In addition to this, it's a good oil source of Linoleic acid, one of the two essential fatty acids we must have to be healthy. Nutritionally speaking, buckwheat is a truly impressive food.

How to Select and Store

Just as with any other food that you may purchase in the bulk section, make sure that the bins containing the buckwheat are covered and that the store has a good product turnover to ensure its maximal freshness. Whether purchasing buckwheat in bulk or in a packaged container, make sure there is no evidence of moisture.

Place buckwheat in an airtight container and store in a cool dry place. Buckwheat flour should be always stored in the refrigerator, while other buckwheat products should be kept refrigerated if you live in a warm climate or during periods of warmer weather.

Stored properly, whole buckwheat can last up to one year, while the flour will keep fresh for several months.

Buckwheat contains rather volatile essential fats inside the seed that aren't protected very well after the air-tight hull has been removed. It isn't a good storing grain unless precautions are taken to remove the oxygen. Like brown rice, oxygen makes the essential oils in the seed go rancid, giving it a bad taste and making it unfit to eat. So, when storing buckwheat for long term storage, be sure you place it in airtight containers and use oxygen absorber technology which should give it a long storage life.

Tips for Preparing Buckwheat: Like all grains, buckwheat should be rinsed thoroughly under running water before cooking, and any dirt or debris should be removed. After rinsing, add one part buckwheat to two parts boiling water or broth. After the liquid has returned to a boil, turn down the heat, cover and simmer for about 30 minutes.

A Few Quick Serving Ideas:

- Combine buckwheat flour with whole wheat flour to make delicious breads, muffins and pancakes.
- Cook up a pot of buckwheat for a change of pace from hot oatmeal as a delicious hearty breakfast cereal.
- Add cooked buckwheat to soups or stews to give them a hardier flavor and deeper texture.
- Add chopped chicken, garden peas, pumpkin seeds and scallions to cooked and cooled buckwheat for a delightful lunch or dinner salad.

Buckwheat Pancakes

1 cup buckwheat flour
1 tsp baking powder
2 Tbsp sugar
1/2 tsp salt
1 egg, beaten
1 cup milk
2 Tbsp melted butter or margarine

Preheat griddle or large skillet (if electric) to 375 F. Grease lightly with oil. Griddle is ready when small drops of water sizzle and disappear almost immediately. Mix dry ingredients together; add egg, milk and butter or margarine, beating well after each addition. Pour 1/4 cup batter for each pancake onto hot griddle. Cook 1 to 1½ minutes, turning when edges look cooked and bubbles begin to break on the surface. Continue to cook 1 to 1½ minutes or until golden brown. Serve immediately.

Buckwheat Crepes

My favorite French street food, these are easy crêpes to make. If you keep them in the freezer, you can pull one out and top it with blanched spinach and a fried or poached egg for a quick and delicious meal.

1 cup low-fat (2 percent) milk
1/3 cup water
3 large eggs
1/2 teaspoon salt
2/3 cup buckwheat flour
1/2 cup unbleached white flour
3 tablespoons canola oil

1. Place the milk, water, eggs and salt in a blender. Cover the blender, and turn on at low speed. Add the flours, then the canola oil, and increase the speed to high. Blend for one minute. Transfer to a bowl, cover and refrigerate for one to two hours.
2. Place a seasoned 7- or 8-inch crêpe pan over medium heat. Brush with butter or oil, and when the pan is hot, remove from the heat and ladle in about 3 tablespoons batter. Tilt or swirl the pan to distribute the batter evenly, and return to the heat. Cook for about one minute, until you can easily loosen the edges with a spatula. Turn and cook on the other side for 30 seconds. Turn onto a plate. Continue until all of the batter is used.

Yield: About 12 8-inch crêpes

Advance preparation: These freeze well for several weeks. Stack them between pieces of wax paper or parchment, and wrap airtight before freezing. You can make and refrigerate them up to a day ahead of serving.

Steamed Buckwheat (kasha)

Makes approximately 3-1/2 cups

I recommend the greenish, tan and white untoasted buckwheat. It has greater vitality than the factory-toasted amber buckwheat (a.k.a. kasha) with its strong, almost scorched flavor. While the water is coming to a boil, to enhance its flavor, I lightly toast the buckwheat to the degree that suits my palate. This small extra toasting step enhances the flavor significantly.

1 cup buckwheat (untoasted)
2 cups water
1/4 teaspoon sea salt

1 tablespoon butter or extra virgin olive oil (optional)
Freshly milled pepper to taste

Toast the buckwheat in a thin saucepan or wok over medium-high heat for about 3 to 4 minutes or until its color turns several shades darker and it emits a deep fragrance. (If you wish stronger flavor yet, reduce the heat and continue to toast for an additional 2 to 3 minutes or until it becomes a deep amber color.)

Place water, sea salt and oil, if using, in a medium saucepan over high heat. Bring to a boil. When boiling, slowly (to prevent the water from splattering out) pour in buckwheat. Cover, reduce to a simmer and cook for 10 minutes or until all the liquid is absorbed. Remove from heat. Let steam, covered, for 5 to 10 minutes with the lid on. Fluff with a fork and serve.

Variations

- To create a more warming dish, sauté the buckwheat in the oil (rather than dry toasting) and/or season with garlic and ginger.
- If you wish cooked buckwheat to stay together (rather than fall separately off your fork), stir one egg, or 2 egg whites, into the grain before toasting it.
- Stir 1/4 cup freshly toasted sunflower seeds or chopped walnuts into the boiling water. For a crisper texture, stir the seeds or nuts into the cooked buckwheat. Replace water with an equal amount of vegetable, chicken or beef stock.