

The quinoa boom



Who could have predicted it? Until recently little-known, quinoa, native to Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru is now part of organic pasta, soft drinks, baby food, vodka, pet food and cosmetics. And the demand just keeps growing. In 2003, The Global New Products Database (Intel International Group) stated that 36 products had quinoa as an ingredient; in 2007, 154 products. Quinoa Corporation, established in 1982, was the first to introduce quinoa to the United States, said Dave Schnorr. "Our sales grew slowly but steadily at about 5-10% during the 80s and 90s and increased to 30 to 40 percent and above that annually since 2000. We knew we were just chipping away at the edges of an enormous iceberg of potential, and that someday the mass market would come knocking for quinoa. I think that day is definitely here." Sergio Nuñez de Arcois, general manager of quinoa wholesaler Andean Naturals, would agree. "Quinoa is off the chart in demand, and most of our clients have either doubled or quadrupled their orders." He also says that the company started selling quinoa in minimum orders of 25 pounds. Now it will not sell in less than container loads, with 44,000 pounds per container. "A year ago we were selling one container of quinoa a month; now we sell on average five containers per month."

Why is quinoa all the rage?
More and more people know
and want gluten-free, organic,
and whole grains. Quinoa is a
complete, easy to digest and hypoallergenic
protein. It tastes

good. It is versatile. Cooked
quinoa goes into baked goods,
casseroles, soups, stews, stirfries,
salads, side dishes,
deserts and energy bars. For
breakfast, quinoa seeds, have
a fluffy, creamy, slightly
crunchy texture and a nutty
flavor. Now there are quinoa
tortilla chips, noodles, pasta
sauces, instant soups and
pilaf mixes, and meat substitutes.

Beyond being a food, Quinoa
is becoming a beverage.

Quinoa One is an organic,
fair trade vodka introduced
in 2007 by Jean-Denis
Courtin, a French restaurateur
who partnered with
Americans Christine and
Daniel Cooney. Quinoa One
Raspberry Vodka was introduced
in 2008 and it will
soon be followed by kumquat
flavored vodka. "European
companies are ahead of
North America in using
quinoa as an ingredient in
products," says Cooney.

And not only people, but pets
too, benefit from quinoa.

Lucy Postins, founder of US
based Honest Kitchen, an organic
pet food company, explains
one answer: "We are
using quinoa because there
are so many pets in this country
that are on a constant prescription
of antibiotics, antiinflammatories
and steroids.

If they just remove the gluten
from their diets a lot of these
health problems would just

clear up." Postins says quinoa
dog food is one of the company's
better sellers. In one year,
sales have grown 90%.

Quinoa also cleans and beautifies.
Saponin, a resin covering

the quinoa seeds, is an excellent bactericide and herbicide. In water, it makes a soapy solution. Quinoa researchers are studying quinoa by-products such as protein isolate, malt, starch, and fibers. Quinoa is also a source of a valuable oil for the natural and organic cosmetics industry. "You are going to find quinoa in a whole lot of new products," predicts Schnorr. The grain's usefulness and versatility gives credence to this claim. But where will all the quinoa come from? Javier Hurtado, Bolivia Minister of Production and Microenterprise, says that his country produces about 60% of the world's quinoa. Bolivia is also the sole producer of a variety known as Royal Quinoa. "This variety only grows in the area around the largest salt flats in the world, the Salar de Uyuni, one of the wonders of the world." Yet can Bolivia shoulder the world's quinoa demand? Hurtado says that the fields must be allowed to lie fallow for a couple of years to ensure continued fertility. And Matthias Jaeger, of Biodiversity International, states that bad weather hurt the 2008 harvest, causing a loss of around 40% of crop volume. Bolivian farmers, are getting this year 100 US dollars for 45 kilos of quinoa, compared to 45 US dollars in 2007. Prices have shot up to 50% of the FOB price, and lead to a 20-30% of increased demand. Hurtado warns, "We had not seen this before, but it is important to invest in protection of the land and natural resources". The boom for quinoa and other Andean grains can also increase cultivation, destroying natural areas. It can be a risky exercise if production is not planned in a sustainable way." With quinoa demand soaring, the best advice is to ensure a stable, eco-friendly growth.

Unlike quinoa's rise, the results of overproducing are predictable.



Quinoa has found many applications beyond the cooked grain and cereal bars. QUINOAONE VODKA has been a hit.

By Leah Dobkin