# So Many Ancient Grains!

## Brenda Davis, RD

Do you know the difference between ancient grains and regular grains? Most plant-based eaters are big fans of grains, and they are a staple in their daily diet. My favorite grains are intact, such as Kamut and spelt berries, oat groats, and wild rice. Last week, I tried Einkorn wheat for the first time. It was delicious – much smaller than Kamut or spelt, but it cooks faster. I love incorporating intact grains into breakfast bowls, salads, and pilafs or dinner bowls. My granddaughters all seem pretty happy to eat cooked Kamut or spelt berries as a snack or with any meal. If you've never cooked with intact ancient grains, you're in for a treat. This article could revolutionize the way you eat grains!



## What Are Ancient Grains?

Ancient grains are cereal and pseudocereal crops that have remained essentially unchanged for several hundred to thousands of years. Unlike modern grains, such as hybridized wheat, ancient grains have not undergone significant modification through selective breeding or industrial agriculture. This category includes grains such as farro, einkorn, emmer, spelt, freekeh, teff, millet, sorghum, amaranth, quinoa, Kamut (also known as Khorasan wheat), and wild rice. These grains are valued not only for their unique flavors and textures but also for their historical and cultural significance.

In contrast, many modern wheat varieties have been selectively bred for higher yields and gluten content, which may impact both their nutritional composition and digestibility. Ancient grains, by comparison, tend to offer a broader nutrient spectrum and often retain a greater diversity of phytochemicals, fiber, and essential minerals.

### Ancient Grains at a Glance

| Grain | Image | Facts |
|---|---|---|
| Farro |  | A hearty, chewy grain with a nutty flavor, farro is commonly used in Italian soups and salads. |
| Einkorn |  | The earliest cultivated wheat, with a delicate, slightly sweet flavor. Grown over 10,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent. |
| Emmer |  | One of the oldest forms of wheat, used in ancient Egypt. Has a rich, earthy taste and is the basis for traditional farro in Italy. |
| Spelt |  | Mild and nutty in flavor, spelt was a staple in medieval Europe. Popular in breads and pastas. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Freekeh |  | Roasted green wheat with a smoky flavor, originating in the Middle East. Traditionally used in Levantine dishes. |
| Teff |  | A tiny grain with a mild, slightly sweet taste. Staple grain in Ethiopia, where it's used to make injera. |
| Millet |  | A small, round grain with a mild flavor. Grown in Africa and Asia for millennia and often used in porridges. |
| Sorghum |  | A gluten-free grain with a neutral taste and chewy texture. Widely cultivated in Africa and India. |
| Amaranth |  | Pseudocereal with a nutty, peppery flavor. Sacred to the Aztecs and used in sweets and porridges. |
| Quinoa |  | Mild and fluffy with a slight crunch. Revered by the Incas and now a global staple in health-conscious diets. |
| Kamut (Khorasan) |  | Large, golden kernels with a buttery flavor. Believed to be an ancient grain from Egypt, now revived in North America. |
| Wild Rice |  | A North American native aquatic grass. High in protein and antioxidants. Often used in indigenous cuisine. |

## Nutritional Value: Are Ancient Grains Superior?

Many ancient grains offer superior nutritional profiles compared to refined or modern grains. Their higher fiber content, lower glycemic indices, and rich micronutrient profiles make ancient grains especially beneficial for older adults managing blood sugar, heart health, and digestive regularity.

Below is a comparative chart highlighting the nutritional profiles of selected grains (per 1 cup cooked):

**Nutrition Profile of Ancient Grains vs White Rice**

| Grain | Calories | Protein (g) | Carbs (g) | Fiber (g) | Fat (g) | Notable Nutrients |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Amaranth | 251 | 9.3 | 46 | 5.2 | 3.9 | Calcium, Iron, Magnesium, Phosphorus |
| Farro | 200 | 7 | 40 | 5 | 1 | B Vitamins, Zinc, Iron |
| Kamut (Khorasan) | 227 | 9.8 | 47 | 5 | 1.4 | Zinc, Magnesium, Selenium, Protein |
| Millet | 207 | 6.1 | 41 | 2.3 | 1.7 | Magnesium, Phosphorus, Antioxidants |
| Quinoa | 222 | 8 | 39 | 5 | 3.5 | Iron, Magnesium, Manganese, Folate |
| Sorghum | 217 | 7 | 44 | 5 | 2 | Iron, Phosphorus, B Vitamins |
| Teff | 255 | 9.8 | 50 | 4 | 2 | Iron, Calcium, Vitamin C |
| Wild Rice | 166 | 6.5 | 35 | 3 | 0.6 | Zinc, Phosphorus, Magnesium |
| **White Rice** | **205** | **4.3** | **45** | **0.6** | **0.4** | **Iron (fortified), Folate (fortified)** |



## Nutrient Highlights

- **Calcium:** Amaranth and teff are excellent sources, with amaranth offering approximately 116 mg and teff around 123 mg of calcium per cup. *(RDA: 1,000 mg for men 51–70, 1,200 mg for women 51+ and all adults 70+)*
- **Iron:** Teff leads the pack, delivering about 5 mg per cup, followed by amaranth and quinoa, which provide roughly 5 and 2.8 mg, respectively. *(RDA: 8 mg for men and postmenopausal women, 18 mg for premenopausal women)*
- **Zinc:** Kamut is especially notable, containing about 2.0 mg of zinc per cup. *(RDA: 8 mg for women, 11 mg for men)*
- **Selenium:** Kamut provides about 54 mcg of selenium per cup, far surpassing brown rice at 19 mcg per cup, making it one of the richest ancient grain sources of this essential mineral. *(RDA: 55 mcg)*
- **Magnesium:** Quinoa and amaranth are standouts, offering about 118 mg and 160 mg, respectively per cooked cup. *(RDA: 310 mg for women 19-30 years; 320 mg for women 31+; 410 mg for men 19-30 years; 420 mg for men 31+)*
- **Protein**: Teff and Kamut shine with nearly 10 grams of protein per cup, followed by amaranth at 9.3 grams and quinoa at 8 grams. These levels make ancient grains especially valuable for boosting plant-based protein intake. *(RDA: ~46 g/day for women; ~56 g/day for men)*

These highlights demonstrate how ancient grains can be powerful allies in supporting nutrient sufficiency, particularly for minerals that are sometimes less abundant in plant-based diets.



## Ancient Grain Culinary Traditions

Ancient grains are deeply embedded in the culinary histories of various cultures:

- Indian traditions incorporate millet and sorghum into flatbreads.
- South American cultures have used quinoa and amaranth in porridges and soups.
- African cuisines rely on teff in both savory and sweet preparations.
- Egyptian cuisine historically included Kamut in breads and stews.
- In Eastern Europe, buckwheat (technically a pseudocereal and often grouped with ancient grains) has long been used in dishes like kasha.
- In parts of the Middle East, freekeh has been a staple for centuries, featured in pilafs and hearty meatless mains.
- Native American diets historically incorporated wild rice into stews and ceremonial dishes, often combined with beans and squash.



## Incorporating Ancient Grains into a Plant-Based Diet

Ancient grains are versatile, easy to prepare, and compatible with plant-based eating. Make a large batch so you can use cooked grains in:

- Grain bowls with legumes and vegetables
- Hearty soups and stews
- Stuffed vegetables
- Baked goods using whole grain flours or sprouted grains
- Raw dehydrated breads and cookies with sprouted grains (pictured below)
- Breakfast porridges
- Grain-based salads
- Pilafs



### Cooking Whole Grains

- You will find a cooking chart for whole grains below. When you soak larger grains, it significantly reduces cooking time. After soaking, rinse with fresh water and proceed. If you are not soaking grains, rinse before cooking.
- You can also cook large grains such as Kamut, spelt, brown rice, and farro using the “pasta method”. Place grains in a large pot of boiling water and drain excess liquid.

# Whole Grain Cooking Guide

## Based on 1 cup (250) of dry grains.

| Grain | Cooking water | Cooking time | Approximate yield |
|---|---|---|---|
| Amaranth | 2 cups | 25-30 minutes | 3 ½ cups |
| Barley, hulled | 3 cups | 1 hour | 3½ cups |
| Buckwheat groats | 2 cups | 20 minutes | 3 cups |
| Einkorn | 3 cups | 35-45 minutes | 3 cups |
| Farro | 2½ cups | 30-40 minutes | 3 cups |
| Kamut (Khorasan), and Spelt berries | 4 cups | Soak overnight or 6-8 hours, and cook 50-60 minutes. If unsoaked, cook 1½ hours | 3 cups |
| Millet | 2½ cups | 20 minutes | 4 cups |
| Quinoa | 2 cups | 15-18 minutes | 3 cups |
| Rice, brown, brown basmati, long grain, short grain | 2 cups | 35 to 45 minutes (let stand covered 5 to 10 minutes) | 3½ cups |
| Sorghum | 4 cups | 30-40 minutes | 3 cups |
| Teff | 3 cups | 15-20 minutes | 3 cups |
| Wild rice | 3 cups | 45 to 55 minutes (let stand covered 10 minutes) | 3½ cups |

# Ancient Grain Recipes

## Brenda's Breakfast Bowl

This is my daily breakfast. Once your ingredients are gathered, this breakfast comes together in minutes. Prepare a large batch of grains and lentils ahead of time so you have enough for several days.

**Ingredients:**

**Whole Grains and Lentils** (1/2- 1 cup)

- Cooked Kamut, spelt, Einkorn, quinoa, or other ancient grains
- Cooked small brown lentils (optional, but adds protein, iron, and zinc)(Cook 1 cup lentils in 3 cups of water for 30-45 minutes)

**Fruit** (1 cup fresh fruit and ¼-½ cup stewed fruit)

- Fresh berries; chopped peaches, nectarines, apricots, apples, bananas, or other fresh or frozen, thawed fruit
- Stewed fruits, without added sugar, such as blueberries or Italian prune plums.

**Nuts/Seeds** (1-2 tablespoons

- Omega-3-rich seeds (chia, hemp, flax)
- Other seeds (pumpkin, sunflower)
- Chopped walnuts, Brazil nuts, pecans, hazelnuts, or almonds

**Creamy Additions** (optional 1/4-1/2 cup)

- Unsweetened yogurt
- Chia pudding
- Cashew cream

**Non-dairy Milk** (1/2-1 cup)

- Fortified non-dairy milk (e.g., soy, almond, hemp, rice, oat, or other)

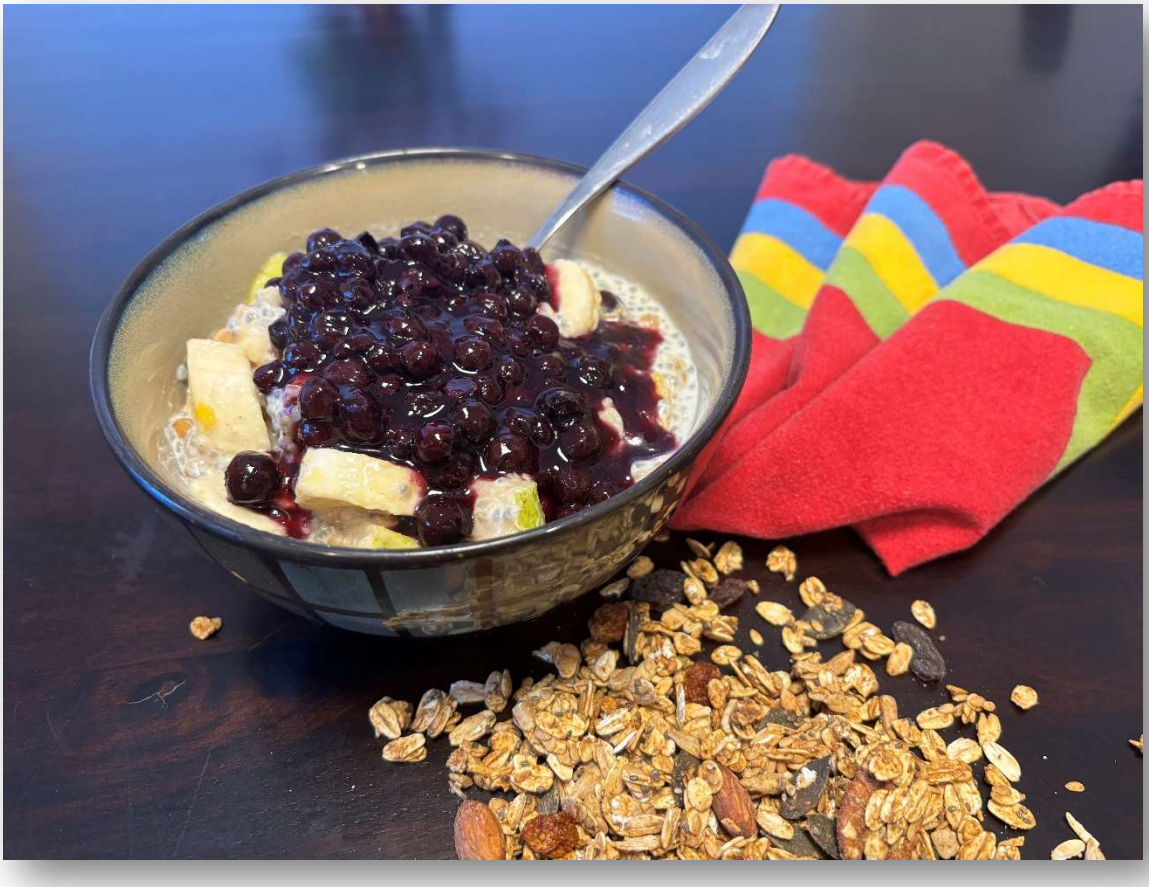
**Spices** (optional 1/4 tsp)

- Such as cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, cardamom, allspice, or pumpkin pie spice

**Instructions:**

1. Place the cooked whole grains and lentils (if using) in a bowl.
2. Add fruit and a creamy addition. Stir gently to mix.
3. Top with stewed fruit, nuts, seeds, and spices (if using).

*Note:* For simplicity, mix favorite nuts and seeds in a single jar. For a take-out breakfast, layer ingredients in a mason jar. Add a homemade granola for crunch, if desired.



## The Big Quinoa Bowl

Makes 4 servings

Dinner bowls are a fast, easy, and satisfying option. Feel free to substitute the beans with flavored tofu or tempeh. Replace the vegetables with your favorites or increase the quantity of vegetables used. Asparagus, cabbage, green beans, onions, snow peas, and squash are all excellent additions. Serve this big bowl with a peanut sauce or your preferred dressing.

### Ingredients:

4 cups cooked ancient grains (e.g., quinoa, Kamut, farro, or wild rice)

3 cups Brussels sprouts, quartered

2 carrots, cut in half lengthwise, then cut into thin slices diagonally

2 cups cauliflower florets

1 red pepper, thinly sliced

4 cups kale or other leafy greens, stemmed and chopped

3 cups cooked firm beans (e.g., edamame, garbanzo, kidney, black)

*Optional Add-Ons:* avocado slices, peanuts, toasted sesame, sunflower or pumpkin seeds, toasted almonds, sprouts, sliced green onions, cilantro or parsley, hot sauce

### Instructions:

1. Put the Brussels sprouts and carrots in a steamer basket, and steam 4 minutes.
2. Add the cauliflower and peppers and steam another 4 minutes.
3. Add the kale and steam for 2 minutes.

4. Assemble the dinner bowls, by placing 1 cup of cooked grains at the base of each bowl.
5. Add the steamed vegetables and beans, using one-quarter of the vegetables and beans in each bowl. Top with peanut sauce or dressing of your choice.



## Kamut Berry Salad

Makes 4-6 servings

Kamut is a wonderfully chewy grain and oh-so-satisfying. Feel free to swap the Kamut for spelt, Einkorn wheat berries, or wild rice (for a gluten-free option). Add 1-2 cups of chickpeas or lentils to make this a full-meal dish. Top with diced avocado and toasted pumpkin or sunflower seeds, if desired.

**Ingredients:**









3 cups cooked Kamut berries

3 cups water

1 large tomato, chopped

1 ½ cups cucumber, chopped

1 small red onion, chopped

1 cup parsley, diced (tightly packed)

¼ cup chopped mint

2 tablespoons runny tahini or olive oil

1/4 cup fresh lemon juice

2 tablespoons tamari

2 cloves garlic, minced

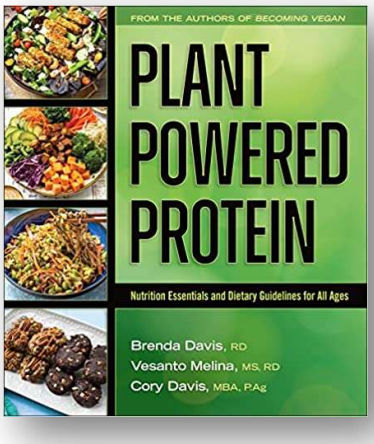
Fresh ground pepper, to taste

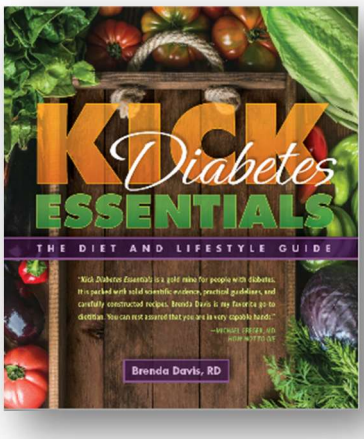
**Instructions:**

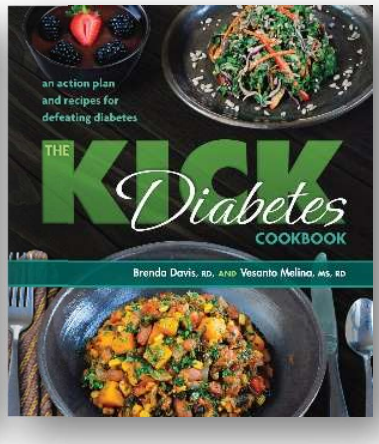
1. In a large bowl, gently mix Kamut berries, tomatoes, cucumbers, red onions, parsley, and mint.

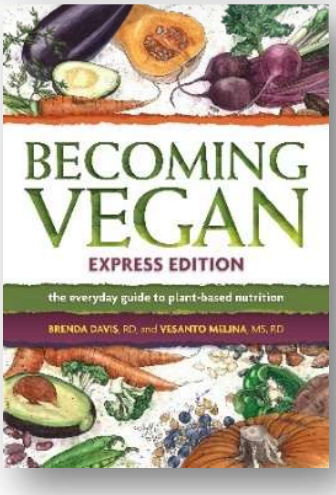
2. In a jar, whisk together tahini or olive oil, lemon juice, tamari, and garlic. Pour over salad and toss gently. Store in the refrigerator.

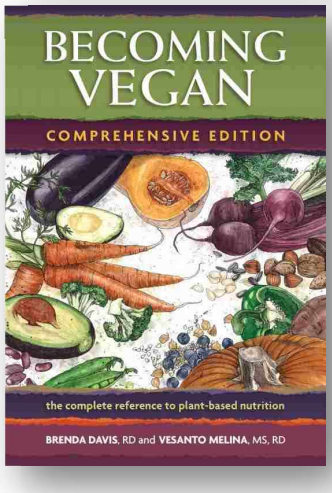


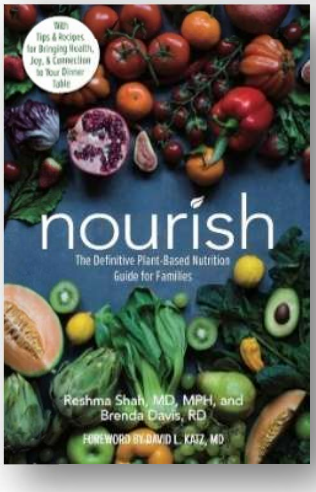



This article was originally written for So Many Cooks in the Kitchen. Brenda Davis, RD is a plant-based pioneer and author/co-author of 13 books on plant-based diets. She is the author/co-author of Plant-Powered Protein, Nourish, Becoming Vegan: Comprehensive and Express Editions, Kick Diabetes Essentials, and The Kick Diabetes Cookbook.
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