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ancient grains for modern meals

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Story by Maria Speck

A friend of mine gave me a copy of “Ancient grains for modern meals”, a fantastic whole-grain cookbook inspired by the Mediterranean cuisines of Greece, southern France, Italy and Turkey. This was very timely for me as I am training for the New York marathon and eating a mountain load of whole-grains. Here, the author Maria Speck tells us more about the book:

What did you discover and learn from writing this book?

I learned to cherish the subtle character and beauty of each grain””from the translucent soft pearls of quinoa to the tender chew of brown rice, and the warming lightness of millet. I love the subtle sweetness of whole oats, the slight sourness of rye, and the pleasing nuttiness of wheat berries. Children understand this immediately. Whenever I give a talk, I take samples of several grains with me and lay them out on a table. In no time, kids are playing with them and examining their colours, shapes and sizes.

How have you kept track of all your recipes over the years?

Like many passionate cooks I devour magazines, books, and blogs, always on the hunt for inspiration. I cut out recipes with a fervor, but many of these simply pile up on a shelf for lack of time to file them away. While working on the book, however, I had to become super-organized. I had folders for each chapter and sub-folders for each recipe. If you don’t keep proper notes while testing a recipe””and I learned this the hard way””you typically have to start from scratch. There simply is no such thing as ‘Oh, I’ll remember this extra step or this spice combination tomorrow’. Chances are you won’t.

Is there a type of grain that you do not like?

The grain I do not like has yet to be grown. As long as I can remember, food rich in carbohydrates has exuded an almost magnetic appeal to me””from the thick sweet milk rice my Greek grandmother prepared for me as a child, to freshly baked bread, and mashed potatoes. Whole grains with their rich character expand this comforting universe of starches, providing limitless opportunity for exploration. Think of a warming bowl of polenta or millet for breakfast, textured bulgur as a side, or supremely chewy spelt and rye berries in salads and stews.

Is there a type of grain that you have heard of and have not cooked with?

A local Massachusetts grain farmer just handed me a bag of her own freshly milled triticale flour. Triticale is a hybrid of wheat and rye with an interesting tangy-sweet aroma. I have enjoyed the whole grain berries, but I have yet to try baking with the flour. In my book, I always try to match the distinct character of each grain with the ingredients of a dish. Can’t wait to create a bread or cookie where the aroma of the triticale flour shines!

How do you keep your ideas fresh when cooking with grains?

Reading, reading, reading, and creative playtime at the stove. Sometimes I mull for days over the creation of a recipe. In fact, some of my best recipe ideas come to me in my sleep. After pondering over a concept for a while, I might wake up in the middle of the night and, voila, there is the perfect flavor combination! I have learned to keep a notepad at my bedside so I don’t lose those inspirations.

Is there a typical student who comes to your cooking classes?

I love that so many people come from all walks of life—from students and young or middle-aged professionals, to fathers and mothers with their kids, and grandmothers. Today, interest in whole grains reaches way beyond the health-conscious, which is fabulous. People want to learn how to incorporate grains into their lives, and they are looking for appealing recipes. I learned all my cooking from my Greek mom so my recipes are inspired by the Mediterranean, a cuisine I cherish for its fresh simple ingredients and alluring flavors.

What are some of your favourite recipes from the book?

In the fall, I love to start my day with a comforting bowl of Orange Polentina with Honey-Mascarpone Topping and for lunch I might have a rustic Turkish Bulgur-Lentil Soup with Minted Olive Oil Butter. When it gets cold, I suggest the Lamb Stew with Wheat Berries in Red Wine Sauce. And don't forget dessert: my favorite in this season is a warming Purple Rice Pudding with Rose Water Dates. It uses luxurious soft-textured Chinese black rice—once eaten only by the emperors—which turns a deep purple hue when cooked. Stunning !

I cook lunch for the online team four days a week, any recommendations for quick and easy recipes?

You mentioned that you enjoy cooking with bulgur more recently. This traditional Mediterranean staple, some call it ancient fast food, is one of my favorite quick-cooking grains. I already mentioned the Bulgur-Lentil Soup with Minted Olive Oil Butter (p.116). As a side dish, you might try the Bulgur with Butter-roasted Almonds and Cinnamon (p. 88) or—if you still have a pot of basil on a windowsill—the Tomato-infused Bulgur Pilaf with Fresh Basil (p. 98) topped with crumbled feta for a light dish. Lemon Quinoa with Currants, Dill, and Zucchini (p. 90) is a quick and easy nourishing meal, as is the Speedy Chickpea Couscous with Pesto (p. 102).

Anything else you would like to add?

Yes, my book is about NOT dieting. Like so many of us, I was constantly on a diet as a young woman. And I was really not successful at it because I love to eat. Until one day my neighbor put a bowl with a delicious wheat berry salad in front of me, prepared with fresh cheese and farmer's market vegetables. This brought back so many childhood memories of eating bulgur, wheat berries and dark bread. It also made me very curious about the character of the different whole grains, their textures and flavors—so I started cooking. And, of course, we all know that whole grains are nutritious and keep you full longer. So suddenly, by making whole grains the center of my meals, I was able to enjoy all good food—and I never went hungry, or on a diet again!

About the author: Maria Speck is an editor, writer, and journalist who was raised in Greece and Germany. Her work has appeared in *Gourmet*, *Saveur*, and *Gastronomica*, as well as in leading European publications such as *Marie Claire* and *Elle*. She teaches cooking classes that focus on Mediterranean cuisine and creating meals with whole grains. Find out [more here](#).

Purchase [Ancient grains for modern meals here](#).

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