



Maria Speck: A Whole Grains Expert Weighs In Expert Interview

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By now you know you should be eating lots of whole grains, but maybe you're not so excited about this idea. Eat More Whole Grains, doesn't sound so sexy does it?

Despite the studies that say eating whole grains will make you healthier, and despite the fact that they're actually easy to prepare and pretty inexpensive to buy, it takes a real devotee, someone with a verve for whole grains to help you see the light and even put a sexy little shimmy in your whole grains step. For me, that person is Maria Speck.



Raised in Greece and Germany, Maria has a lifelong passion for whole grains, which came together in her first book, the award-winning *Ancient Grains for Modern Meals* (Ten Speed Press).

I asked Maria a few questions about whole grains and how they can become a bigger part of our eating lives.

What is the biggest misconception people have about whole grains?

Two major misconceptions keep people from enjoying what I like to call ancient grains: they take forever to cook and they are very chewy. Here's the good news: in my book, I have quick-cooking and slow-cooking whole grains. Quick-cooking whole grains such as quinoa, bulgur, millet, buckwheat, and polenta (cornmeal) cook up super-fast on a busy weeknight, most in about 15 minutes. Slower cooking grains such as whole wheat and spelt berries, kamut, whole rye, and hulled (whole grain) barley benefit from soaking overnight, similar to dried beans, and simmer for about 1 hour--but you can easily make them ahead on the weekend, and store them in the fridge for up to 5 days, or freeze them. And while slower cooking grains are indeed more chewy, many quick-cooking grains have a lovely soft texture. You'll be surprised how comforting they can be. Just think of a warming bowl of a simple polenta, slightly salted, with a drizzle of butter. Delicious and satisfying at any time, especially in the cooler months of the year. Millet and buckwheat are similarly comforting and appealing.

For someone just starting to try to incorporate more whole grains into their diet, where should they begin.

I think they should start with some of the quick-cooking grains such as quinoa or millet and enjoy their distinct subtle aroma and texture. Both of these are very versatile and can stand in for white rice in soups and salads. Whole wheat couscous is another super-fast grain as it just needs a few minutes of steaming. I also use a lot of bulgur because it adds rich nuttiness and a bit more chew.

What is the easiest way to prepare whole grains?

I always say grains are as easy to cook as a pot of pasta. Just simmer them in water with a bit of salt, or in half broth and water for more flavor, until they are tender with a slight chew. Drain in a fine-mesh sieve, return to the pot and allow to steam for 5 to 10 minutes, covered. During steaming, grains absorb any remaining liquid which allows them to plump up beautifully.

What is your favorite way to prepare whole grains to really knock the socks off someone?

It has to be dessert. Most people don't realize that grains can be on your plate all day, at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, even for dessert. Imagine a warm bowl of creamy rice pudding, topped with rose water-infused dates. I make it with soft-textured Chinese black rice which turns a stunning burgundy when cooked. Or how about **Wheat Berry Fools with Grand Marnier Figs** [<http://www.thekitchn.com/recipe-wheat-berry-fools-with-grand-marnier-figs-recipes-from-the-kitchn-177009>] ; a lofty dessert with a snappy tartness from thick Greek yogurt, interspersed with chewy grain berries and boozy dried figs. But my favorite is a decadent ricotta millet pudding, lemon-scented and honey-sweetened, served with warm raspberry compote.

That sounds amazing. Tell me more!

Millet is a wonderful grain, quick-cooking and versatile--yet most people wouldn't even consider it because they believe it is only good as bird food. This is why I have developed my "stealth serving" technique. I hide the millet in this mouth-watering pudding. Then I tell everyone to guess the secret ingredient. Well, I have yet to meet someone who doesn't lick their bowl clean--that's when I put on the grin of the Cheshire cat and reveal to my guests they just ate millet. The victory is all mine, and I hope they will try it some day.

Can you share with me a story or a piece of history or other interesting tidbit about whole grains?

In 2005, archaeologists discovered the world's most ancient noodles, not in Italy but in China. They were 4000 years old and made from millet. The pasta was found in strings, about twenty inches long, and it was remarkably well preserved.

What's your desert island grain?

It has to be rye. It's so underrated. Rye has a characteristic tanginess which I cherish, be it as a whole grain in salads and stews, or when ground into highly aromatic whole-grain flour. In my book, I showcase a recipe for real German pumpernickel which has little resemblance to what you might find in your local supermarket. The bread rises naturally, without any agents such as commercial yeast, and bakes at a low temperature for more than four hours. This process, traditionally done in sealed steam ovens, transforms rye's tanginess and creates a mesmerizing naturally sweet bread.

More From Maria Speck

→ **Visit Maria's website: Maria Speck** [<http://www.mariaspeck.com>]

→ **Get the book: Ancient Grains for Modern Meals: Mediterranean Whole Grain Recipes for Barley, Farro, Kamut, Polenta, Wheat Berries & More** [<http://www.amazon.com/dp/1580083544/?tag=apartmentth0a-20>] by Maria Speck (Ten Speed Press)

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Posted by Sara Kate Gillingham-Ryan

Sara Kate is the founding editor of The Kitchn. She started the site in 2005 and has since written three cookbooks. The third, written with co-author Faith Durand, is The Kitchn Cookbook. It will be published in Fall 2014 by Clarkson Potter.

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