

Long-forgotten grain proves quite the treat



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Spelt is a wonderfully wholesome grain that has been around for 3,000 years, along with others like kamut and amaranth. It is highly nutritious, very versatile for baking and cooking and has a lovely nutty flavour. Many people with wheat intolerances find that they can enjoy spelt.

You are probably wondering why, if spelt is so wonderful, is it not widely used in breads, cereals and baked goods. It's usually for a number of reasons that boil down to economics. Spelt as a crop has a far lower yield than wheat, so you will not get as much from one crop.

Secondly, the spelt grain is protected by a hard husk which is difficult to remove. This requires special machinery which is very expensive.

Don't forget, wheat has been very heavily invested in as a crop and different strains have been developed with higher yields, greater resistance to pests etc. Spelt has largely been forgotten about, but there is a definite revival.

While spelt contains gluten, many people with wheat intolerances find that they can still enjoy products made with spelt. It is thought that there is a specific enzyme in wheat that causes problems, not just the gluten.

When compared to wheat, spelt is exponentially more nutritious, probably because it has not been interfered with by man and retains its original goodness.

- It contains 25-30pc more B vitamins (vital for brain function and the nervous system).
- It contains 45pc more vitamin E (an important antioxidant).
- It's higher in healthier unsaturated fats.
- It has perfect protein -- which contains all the essential amino acids -- very unusual in a plant food.
- It has high levels of L-Tryptophan, which is involved in the production of serotonin, which is a vital brain chemical.
- It is high in fibre but very easy to digest as the fibre is water soluble.

I have experimented baking with spelt flour with good, bad and indifferent results. While similar to wheat, it does not behave in exactly the same way, especially with the quantity of liquid that is required. Spelt will use anything from 10-20pc less liquid.

It also has far more substance so you won't get as much rise on it. So depending on the brand of flour you buy, you don't really know how it will turn out.

I was very fortunate to spend a day in Cahir, Co Tipperary, visiting Ballybrado house and farm that has been producing wholesome organic flours, muesli and porridge oats for the last 20 years.

Ballybrado produces a full range of spelt, rye and wheat flours, plus a new Little Bakers range of spelt cake and bread mixes designed to encourage children to bake.

The brown bread mix is my favourite, with added oats, sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds and chia. All you have to do is add buttermilk and pour into a loaf tin. For €2.50 a bag (the mix makes one loaf) I think this is very good value for a nutty, wholesome spelt loaf.

The bread will stay fresh for at least five days, which is important so that you don't end up binning it. Spelt can be used to make pasta, puffed up to make a spelt version of Rice Krispies, and also rolled into flakes which can be cooked as a porridge or turned into a muesli.

One of the biggest challenges I find for people trying to eat well is to find a good breakfast cereal. Porridge isn't to everyone's liking and you also need a bit of variety. Ballybrado make two lovely mueslis and I have included a recipe for granola which is sweetened and toasted.

Homemade Granola

When the recipe uses mls to measure solids, just use your measuring jug.

ingredients

250ml porridge oats flakes
250ml spelt flakes
150g mixed raw nuts, not toasted or salted
100g dried cranberries
100ml sunflower seeds
100ml pumpkin seeds
2tbls dark brown sugar
1/2tsp ground cinnamon
1/2tsp salt
100ml honey
2tbls grapeseed or sunflower oil
1tsp vanilla extract

Method

- In a pot, mix together honey, sugar, sunflower oil, cinnamon, salt and vanilla extract. Very gently heat until it is mixed well.
- In a large bowl, mix the oats, seeds, nuts and dried cranberries.
- Pour over the honey mixture and mix quickly and thoroughly.
- Line a baking tray with parchment paper and spread the mixture onto it with a spatula.
- Bake for 10 minutes at 180C and stir. Bake for a little while longer until it is golden.

- Remove from the oven and break up any large pieces. Allow to cool completely before storing in an airtight container.
- Serve with Greek yogurt and fresh fruit.

Useful contacts

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