

## Ancient Grains, Newly Popular



**Grains fit the plant-forward trend perfectly. Protein, flavor, and texture abound. Learn how to gain with grains.**

Grains have emerged as one of the shining-star categories of the plant-forward trend. As a great source of protein as well as flavor, texture, and versatility, grains—especially intact whole grains and ancient grains—provide menu appeal beyond the vegan and vegetarian category, and they resonate with younger diners and foodies alike.

Ancient grains (defined as grains that have not been changed much by selective breeding), are very on-trend right now. In fact, according to Datassential, ancient grains have experienced four-year menu growth rate of 334%. In grain bowls and salads, side dishes and entrée specialties, grains such as amaranth, teff, quinoa, spelt, millet, barley, and many varieties of rice are high in protein while adding variety to flexitarian and semi-vegetarian menu concepts.

Here are some innovative ways to add these valuable plant foods to your menu:

*Porridge:* Beyond the oatmeal of Goldilocks fame, grain-based porridges have become a thing for hot breakfasts and beyond. Almost any kind of grain can be cooked into a creamy, comforting porridge, to be topped with everything from brown sugar and heavy cream to nuts, seeds, sautéed or raw vegetables, and crumbled cooked bacon. A mix of grains like quinoa and oats or millet and wild rice adds texture and signature distinction.

- Offer a self-serve bar or mix-and-match menu platform with several kinds of porridge (such as oatmeal and a mixed-grain hot cereal) along with sweet and savory toppings and mix-ins
- Bake leftover over porridge into rustic breads and rolls

- 
- Experiment with global porridges, including Chinese congee
  - Menu savory porridge as an accompaniment to entrées, instead of mashed potatoes or plain rice

**For more information on grains, see below.**

*Appetizers and Snacks:* Grains may not immediately come to mind for this menu category, but creativity counts.

- Form grains into cakes or balls to serve with a topping or dipping sauce, such as quinoa cakes with smoked salmon or rice balls (arancini) with marinara
- Use whole grain bread as a base for crostini and bruschetta
- Serve flavored popcorn as a bar snack
- Fill egg rolls and spring rolls with grains and other ingredients

*Side Dishes and Salads:* The world is full of traditional grain salads and side dishes that are healthy, delicious, and appealing to customers, including tabbouleh (a Middle Eastern cracked wheat salad), mushroom barley, pilaf, and kasha (toasted buckwheat).

- Prepare and menu grains as an easy alternative to risotto
- Use cooked brown rice, barley, or another whole grain in fried rice
- Substitute chewy farro or wheat berries for al dente pasta in a Mediterranean-style salad
- Toss quinoa with olive oil, lemon, and fresh herbs

*Grain Bowls:* The darling of on-trend lunches and fast-casual menu platforms, bowls serve as a natural showcase for grains, many of them in a customizable format. Grain bowls are particularly useful operationally because the individual components can be prepped ahead and assembled or finished to order, reinforcing their fresh appeal.

- Menu a seasonal grain bowl with a changing array of vegetables
- Add à la carte protein toppings such as grilled chicken, salmon, a shrimp skewer, or a poached or fried egg
- Add global twists with toppings and mix-ins such as curried cauliflower, kimchi, or feta and chickpeas
- Vary grain choices, from delicate millet, quinoa, or couscous (technically a pasta but often menued as a grain) to hearty barley, spelt, or wheat berries. Or create a blend of several different grains.

---

## More Ways to Serve Grains

- Add to soups
- Fold into meatloaf and meatball mixtures
- Offer as a burger alternative
- Build energy bars around cooked grains
- Pop or toast grains for a garnish
- Use whole wheat or other grain-based pasta

Source: Datassential SNAP! Food Profile: Ancient Grains (2018)

*The information provided is based on a general industry overview, and is not specific to your business operation. Each business is unique and decisions related to your business should be made after consultation with appropriate experts.*

---

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Two-thirds of operators have menued whole or ancient grains, with onsite operators most likely to offer them.

---

## GET STARTED

- Cooking grains can be a little confusing. If they're new to you, check out this [comprehensive guide](#).