

Quinoa goes from staple in Andean culture to U.S. superfood

By Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, Time

As a child, Benjamin Huarachi, 55, ate quinoa almost every day, as a matter of practicality. The crop is one of few that thrive on Bolivia's high plains, 13,000 ft. (4,000 m) above sea level, explains the farmer. His impoverished family had no idea that the colorful tall tufts yield one of the healthiest foods on the planet. Nor did Huarachi imagine that his childhood staple would one day bring economic success. "Quinoa was always comida para los indios [food for Indians]," he says, almost laughing, "Today it's food for the world's richest."

Over the past decade, the "Andean superfood" has become a pinnacle product for First World foodies. Often mistaken for a grain, quinoa is actually a chenopod (cousin to a beet); rich in minerals, it's the only vegetable that's a complete protein. To the added delight of politically correct health nuts, it's produced by small-scale Andean farmers like Huarachi who reap direct benefits of its international popularity. Recently, those benefits have skyrocketed: quinoa's price has tripled since 2006, triggering a boom in the poorest region of South America's poorest country. "Now we've got tractors for our fields and parabolic antennas for our homes," says Huarachi, who's also a board member of Bolivia's largest quinoa-growers association, ANAPQUI.

Growers relish in the moment and the attendant prosperity. "My quinoa sells like hotcakes," says Fidencia Huayllas, grinning. She's spent her boom cash on expanding her mud-and-brick home. Seventy percent of the region's high school graduates can now

afford to attend university, Huarachi says, “thanks to quinoa.” He leans forward, face brightening: “In 1983, 100 lb. of quinoa sold for 25 bolivianos – the price a T-shirt. Now that sack goes for \$100 [700 bolivianos]. That’s a lot of T-shirts.”

But the windfall could become a double-edged sword. In February, violence over prime quinoa-growing territory left dozens injured, and land conflict is spreading. “Sure, the price of quinoa is increasing,” says Carlos Nina, a local leader in Bolivia’s quinoa heartland, “but so are our problems.” Apart from increasing feuds over property rights, these include the collapse of the traditional relationship between llama herding and soil fertilization, with potentially disastrous consequences of quinoa’s “organic” status, and the ironic twist that the children of newly prosperous farmers no longer like eating quinoa, contributing to dietary problems.

According to historians, quinoa cultivation originated in the Altiplano around 3,000 B.C. Legend says it was a gift from the gods to the indigenous Aymara: a highly nutritious crop as small compensation for being saddled with one of earth’s harshest climates. (It’s an easy story to believe, since only divine intervention seems to explain how anything could sprout from the high plateau’s rocky, sandy soil.)

The present from the heavens has always been a base of the Andean diet, but only recently did the crop begin its international journey. In 1993, NASA researchers recommended it as part of a potential space-colony diet. Over the following decade, the food gained wider appeal, going from hippie hype to Costco convenient practically overnight. “Quinoa was in the eye of the storm,” says Bolivian-born Sergio Núñez del Arco, founder of Andean Naturals, the U.S.’s

largest quinoa importer, explaining that the product fit almost every recent health craze: whole grain, gluten-free, fair trade, organic.

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