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South American Superfoods

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Your new Latin love may be in Aisle #9

by Shannon Melnyk



Salsa, sizzling film stars and saucy Spanish sweet nothings – Latin culture brings to the world a passion that makes its way into our heart and minds; and now, perhaps our immune systems, hormones and digestive tracts, too: nutrients native to South America are finding their way to our grocery aisles faster than you can say Flamenco. Roots, berries, seeds and teas enjoyed for centuries are creeping into superfood territory for their health benefits.

Perhaps some of these feisty foods will put some passion in your step:

Acai -

A taste sensation like no other, the zingy blend of berries with a hint of chocolate can be found in the Acai berry, harvested in the rainforests of Brazil. It's been called everything from an antioxidant powerhouse to a memory booster; the purple gems are packed with ten times the antioxidant content of red grapes and plenty of amino acids and essential fatty acids. Acai can be found in juice blends at your grocers and is showing up as a feature flavour at your local Booster Juice.

Maca -

Also known as Peruvian ginseng, Maca is not technically in the ginseng family but is a root originally enjoyed by the Incan culture in the high altitudes of the Andes Mountains and now known as an adaptogen, used to increase the body's resistance to stress, trauma, anxiety and fatigue. Maca is also marketed as a libido booster and hormone balancer available in supplements, but also more recently as an addition to whole food concoctions; Canadian vegan triathlete and author Brendan Brazier was so impressed with the results he achieved with this radish-like perennial that he included it as a major ingredient in Vega, a plant-based smoothie widely available as a whole food meal replacement.

Quinoa

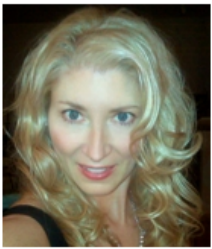
Peru is also home to the mother of all grains, otherwise known as quinoa. A great source of dietary fibre and high in magnesium, potassium and iron, quinoa is high in protein and unlike wheat or rice, contains an almost perfect balance of all eight essential amino acids making it an unusually complete protein source. The fact that it's gluten-free and easy to digest is a bonus not to mention the South American staple boasts a unique, nutty flavour.

Chia

Remember Chia Pets? What those commercials back in the '80s didn't mention is that the seeds from chia are part of a healthy diet in many parts of the world. Originally grown in Mexico and now harvested throughout South America, chia seeds were so valuable to the Aztec Warriors for their energy and endurance that they were accepted as legal tender. It's no wonder, as a little sprinkle on cereal packs a big punch; chia seeds are a great source of soluble fibre, omega-3's, antioxidants, minerals and easily digestible protein. In some homes, chia has replaced flax seeds; they don't require grinding to get the full benefits and are not as quick to go rancid.

Yerba Mate

Could an Argentine elixir replace your java? With the reputation of being "the drink of the gods", one may be inclined to try this energy-boosting tea made from the South American holly shrub or yerba plant. Yerba mate is the national drink of Argentina, containing half the caffeine of coffee and offering a less acidic blend that is an acquired, earthy taste. Westerners have discovered the tea has all the good buzz of coffee but none of the crash effects, not to mention 90 percent more antioxidants than green tea, plenty of B vitamins, chromium and the calming natural presence of tryptophan.



About the Author: Shannon Melnyk is a freelance journalist and copywriter based in Vancouver. Dividing her time between newspapers, magazines, television and the world wide web, her latest adventures in word slinging can be seen at www.shannonmelnyk.com

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