

Stip, Kasha, Soba, Pizzoccherri!

What's a wheat that's not a wheat? A buckwheat!

That's right. As we point out at the mill, buckwheat is not part of the amber fields of grain but is the seed of leafy, green plant related to rhubarb. We thank the Dutch for its name and its introduction to America.



The Dutch thought the buckwheat's three-sided seed looked like the nut of the beech – *boec* – tree and considered its culinary use and nutrition similar to *weite* or wheat. Their *boecweite* is our buckwheat. The less than fertile soil, rough terrain, and cool climate with a short growing season of the Hudson Valley was perfect for the plant to thrive. The Dutch delighted in their delicious buckwheat dishes – stip (porridge), poffertjes (fluffy pancakes), and balkenbrij (scrapple) much like we enjoy cream of buckwheat and buckwheat pancakes (hold the scrapple). A dollop of creamy Dutch butter brought out the nutty flavor, much like buttery *Earth Balance* does today.

Not only tastier, buckwheat is more filling than wheat products, is a terrific source of energy and is packed with fiber, B vitamins, magnesium, copper, and manganese. And to top it off, it is a complete protein possessing all nine essential amino acids that help build muscle, regulate the immune system, and improve moods. Since the body does not produce these acids, they must be part of our diet. Throw away those dietary supplement pills and serve up the buckwheat!

Such a nutritious food, it is a wonder why buckwheat under cultivation in the United States swooned from about a million acres in 1918 to a paltry 50,000 acres in 1964. The reason: farmers could stimulate the growth of corn and wheat by applying nitrogen fertilizer. But buckwheat breeds best in infertile soil. It's all about the yield. Good, though, does shine through. Demand for buckwheat has risen due to its non-wheat nature: it is gluten free. GF foods array grocery shelves as do products containing "ancient grains," one of which is buckwheat.

How ancient? Its first known domestic cultivation dates from 6,000 years ago in the northern mountains of China. To this day China is the second largest producer of buckwheat and converts it to noodles, wonton wrappers, and tea. From China buckwheat spread west to the Russian Empire and Eastern Europe where it was used to make kasha, a porridge made from roasted groats (buckwheat seeds without the hulls), blini (best with sour cream and caviar) and blintz. Further west it went to Brittany home of the galette – super thin pancake that takes sweet or savory toppings, but is best with a pat of butter.

Buckwheat spread into the Korean peninsula where in addition to noodles, it is transformed into jelly, *memil-muk*, a starch-rich dish which, according to tradition, is helpful to chase away ghosts

and, according to urban legend, is served in late-night drinking establishments no doubt for the same affect, warding off pink elephants and green snakes.

On to Japan where buckwheat noodles, *soba*, began to fill bowls in the 18th and 19th centuries when neighborhood *soba* cafes sprang up. These noodles had what white rice lacked: robust taste and thiamine (vitamin B1), the lack of which can cause beriberi, a disease which sounds better than it is. Japan is by far and away the world's largest importer of buckwheat, including from the United States, China, and Russia, the world's largest producer. *Soba* hot or cold, with a touch of sesame oil or miso broth, is a meal. GF folks beware: while *soba* is classically made from 100% buckwheat, 30% buckwheat content is sufficient for the noodles to be labeled *soba*. Why add wheat to a good thing? Wheat's gluten releases proteins which, when wet, produces a sticky, elastic dough, easier to work than pure buckwheat which becomes brittle.



The joy of making pasta from buckwheat was highlighted by Stanley Tucci in his CNN "Search for Italy" series. In the cool hills of northern Italy the buckwheat plant flourishes and the flour is used to make Pizzoccherri. Pasta from buckwheat is more wholesome than pasta from wheat, but Stanley added about one-third white flour to two-thirds buckwheat flour to make a dough that could be rolled, stretched, and shaped.

I bought some Colvin Run Mill buckwheat and released my inner Tucci by making the broad, flat noodles of traditional Pizzoccherri. After a brief rest, I plunged them for a precious few seconds in a pot where thinly sliced potatoes and stalks of Napa cabbage had been cooking. Drain the mixture, mix it with highly meltable fontina cheese and a bit of parmesan for bite, top with garlic infused butter, bake a quick 5 minutes, and the Pizzoccherri will satisfy the most ravenous winter appetite. As he was tasting his mixture, Stanley commented: "It needs more butter!" When in doubt, more butter.



Buckwheat has other uses. The crop can be planted to prevent soil erosion and weed growth (extensive root system) or to be plowed under to nourish the soil ("green manure"). Buckwheat malt can substitute for barley malt for buckwheat whiskey. Not to let the hulls go to waste, for centuries they have been used as pillow stuffing in Asia. According to one Chinese article: "Healers around the world have recommended buckwheat hull pillows for optimum neck support and sound sleep." I wonder if that claim has been evaluated by the FDA. Then again, you can try yourself as buckwheat pillows are the latest, now completely made in the USA: <https://hullopillow.com/buckwheat-pillow/> (Please send your reviews).

Crossword clue: A non-wheat wheat. Nine letters. You got it! Pass the butter, please!

