

DELICIOUS

5 Peruvian Superfoods You've Never Heard Of



Quinoa, açai, and maca first scaled the heights of health-conscious glory. Now meet the latest Peruvian powerhouses:

AS PERU BECOMES a more prominent contender for the gastronomic fountain of youth, it does raise the question: Why does Peru have such an embarrassment of nutritional riches? Manuel Villacorta, a nutrition expert and author of *Peruvian Power Foods: 18 Superfoods, 101 Recipes, and Anti-Aging Secrets from the Amazon to the Andes*, says it has to do with its location. “Within Peru, there are a range of bio-diverse microclimates—the coast, the tropical Amazon, and the Andes mountains. Throughout Peru there are volcanic soils that have been untouched; this is believed to be one of the key reasons that Peruvian superfoods are so potent.” Volcanic soils, saturated with ash, release nutrient-rich minerals slowly over time, making them extremely fertile.

While by now most of you have heard about—but may still struggle to pronounce—many of the more common Peruvian imports, there’s an emerging influx from the Peruvian cornucopia infiltrating our health food stores and supermarkets. Here’s our roundup of the standouts.

SACHA INCHI

TASTE: Earthy and nutty

BREAKDOWN: Also known as mountain or Inca peanut, sacha inchi is actually a seed that grows on thick vines in the Amazon jungle. Cultivated over 3,000 years ago, the seed was prized by the Incas for its nutritional fortitude. Sacha inchi provides more protein than most nuts, along with antioxidants such as vitamin E, good for vision, and serotonin-boosting tryptophan, which helps combat depression. Rich in unsaturated fatty acids, sacha inchi joins ranks with chia, flax, and microalgae as one of the best vegan omega-3 sources. Villacorta calls it “a singular power food, providing more omega-3 fatty acids (by volume nearly 50%) than any other plant source.” Omega-3s regulate brain function, protect the central nervous system, fight inflammation, and can improve circulation and blood pressure. One study, published in the Peruvian journal *Revista Peruana de Medicina Experimental y Salud Pública*, showed sacha inchi might benefit individuals with elevated cholesterol.

TRY IT: The seeds and the oil are both becoming widely available in the U.S. Snack on the roasted seeds or toss them in a salad for some added crunch. The oil can be swapped for olive oil in most salad dressings and dips. Caveat: Sacha inchi oil can’t withstand high heat, so don’t use it as a cooking oil—it will destroy the omega benefits.

PICHUBERRY

TASTE: A cross between tomato and passion fruit.

BREAKDOWN: Although botanically unrelated to cherries or gooseberries, common names for the plant include Inca berry, golden berry, Cape gooseberry, and Peruvian cherry. Pichuberrys are native to the Peruvian Andes region and the mountains of Machu Picchu. Similar to tomatillos, pichuberrys start out green and waxy before ripening into a bright yellow inside their papery husks. Villacorta has high praise for pichuberry’s impressive nutrient stats, referring to it as “possibly the greatest super fruit in the U.S.” Rare for a fruit, pichuberry has high levels of vitamin D, a vitamin many Americans are deficient in; just three ounces provide nearly half of the daily



ARTWORK BY ELLEN ROONEY



PURPLE CORN

TASTE: Slightly nuttier and sweeter than yellow corn.

BREAKDOWN: Native to Peru, purple corn and purple potatoes grow along the coast as well in the mountain highlands. They get their striking pigment from anthocyanins, a concentrated form of immune-boosting antioxidants that give red and purple plants their deep color. Once reserved for Incan kings, purple foods do more than simply pretty up your plate. Foods with high anthocyanin content, such as purple vegetables, have a correspondingly high antioxidant activity. “Purple potatoes have three times more antioxidants than other potatoes,” says Villacorta. “The anthocyanins may also prevent a blood sugar spike, especially helpful for people

requirement.

Pichuberries also contain an anti-oxidant subgroup called withanolides—cancer-fighting compounds that reduce oxidative stress. As a bonus, pichuberries are a low-glycemic food, meaning they don't spike blood sugar levels and help curb cravings.

TRY IT: Their combination of sweet and tart flavor make pichuberries amazingly versatile, says Villacorta. They can be used with equal success in guacamoles, salsas, and vinaigrettes as well as in jams, pies, and oatmeal.

CAMU CAMU

TASTE: Mouth-puckeringly sour.

BREAKDOWN: Native to the Amazon, this purplish red nectarine-size berry claims record-breaking amounts of vitamin C—Villacorta says it is equivalent to 60 times the amount in a single orange. As a result, the acidic content makes this tropical fruit impossible to eat raw. Instead, the pulp or powdered form can be combined with other fruits to soften its bite. The vitamin C found in camu camu, says Villacorta, is distinguished by its bioavailability. “It is better absorbed than synthetic vitamin C and works synergistically to support the immune system and neutralize free radicals.” One study published in the *Journal of Cardiology* compared male smokers who drank camu camu juice to those who took vitamin C tablets. After a week, the camu camu juice drinkers experienced more significant antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects, compared to those who took vitamin C tablets containing equivalent vitamin C content.

TRY IT: Camu camu's high vitamin C content means it does not lend itself to heating, says Villacorta. “The best way to enjoy it is to mix into lemonades, smoothies, and salad dressings for a tangy kick.”



with diabetes.” A study published in *PLoS One* linked the compounds in purple corn with reducing some of the common triggers for diabetes-related kidney disease.

TRY IT: A wildly popular beverage in Peru, Chicha Morada is made from boiling purple corn in water and combining it with spices and fruit to make a refreshing, vitamin-infused drink.

LUCUMA

TASTE: Maple syrup meets pumpkin.

BREAKDOWN: Natives refer to lucuma, a subtropical fruit grown in the Andes, as the “Gold of the Incas.” Green on the outside with a fleshy orange interior similar to a persimmon, the fruit has a creamy, caramel taste that makes it a natural for desserts. It's a cult favorite among its numerous fans, boasting the distinction of



Peru's top-selling ice cream flavor. The pulp's dry texture, reminiscent of a hardboiled egg yolk, lends itself well to powdered forms, which is how it's sold in the U.S. But don't be deceived by lucuma's mellow flavor. Laden with an impressive repertoire of benefits, lucuma scores high for iron, fiber, vitamin C, calcium, potassium, and especially beta-carotene. A recent study suggests the lucuma can speed up wound healing by aiding tissue regeneration.

TRY IT: Use lucuma powder to flavor ice cream, puddings, and smoothies, or add to granola, hot cereals, and beverages to subtly add sweetness. Lucuma rates low on the glycemic index, making it a tasty, lower-calorie alternative to sugar, but without the bitter aftertaste of stevia.

—ELIZABETH MARGLIN