

A Bit About Spelt

In recent years, an increase in consumer awareness and health consciousness has fuelled a growing interest in heritage crop varieties. These crops are notable for unique characteristics that distinguish them from conventional varieties. Spelt (*Triticum spelta*) is one such grain that has been recognized for its high protein content, broad spectrum of easily absorbed nutrients, its exceptional hypoallergenic properties, and its suitability as an organically grown crop.

One of the oldest cultivated grains, spelt is thought to have originated between 6000-5000 BC (Stone Age period) in the region that is now Iran. Spelt moved northerward and westward with the migrations of early civilizations and by the Bronze Age, 4000-1000 years ago, was widely distributed throughout the Near East, the Balkans, Europe and Caucasia. Spelt cultivation began in North America in the late 1800s, reached peak production in the early 1900s then began a steady decline as breeding programs improved on the desirable qualities of other grain varieties such as wheat, oats and barley.

Although spelt is a close cousin of modern wheat, *Triticum aestivum*, a major difference separates the two. Modern wheat (*T. aestivum*) is an “open wheat”, which easily loses its loose outer husk during harvesting and threshing, while spelt is a variety of “covered wheat” with kernels enclosed by close-fitting husks that require specialized processing to remove. The additional time and expense involved in dehulling spelt and other covered wheats is one of the main reasons for a loss of interest in these varieties over the years. Spelt remained the major cereal crop of many isolated regions of Germany, Switzerland, Belgium and Austria (where it is known as dinkel), but fell from use in most other areas.

Today, spelt is growing in popularity among discerning North American consumers who value its nutty flavour and high nutritional value. Ironically, the recent renaissance of spelt is due to the very characteristics that originally led to its decline. The tough outer hull is responsible spelt's delicate taste and higher levels of water-soluble nutrients than those found in open wheats. Water-soluble nutrients, including B-complex vitamins, are readily absorbed by the body, adding to spelt's nutritional value. Spelt has a protein content of 15.8-19.2%, about 10-25% higher than that of conventional hard red wheat, which averages 12.5%-13.5% protein. The durability of the spelt kernel also make it an excellent crop for organic farmers: the grain is protected from soil borne pathogens at the time of sowing, and the ripening grain is protected from pests and environmental pollutants. A grain noted for its hardiness, spelt can out-produce conventional grains in marginal conditions (i.e. low temperature and moisture levels). While years of intensive selection and cultivar development in modern wheat has led to the development of a grain with desired gluten traits suited to modern baking, little or no such cultivar “improvement” of spelt or other ancient grains has been carried out. As a result, the balance of glutenin and gliadin proteins is such that many suffering wheat sensitivities are able to consume these grains without ill effect.

"The spelt is the best of grains. It is rich and nourishing and milder than other grain. It produces a strong body and healthy blood to those who eat it and it makes the spirit of man light and cheerful. If someone is ill boil some spelt, mix it with egg and this will heal him like a fine ointment." ~ St. Hildegard, ca. 1200

Source:

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