

Barley is a building block of civilization

FOOD & WINE

# A grain of consequence

By Carol Goodman Kaufman

GETTY IMAGES

In the movie based on the beloved P.L. Travers' book "Mary Poppins," the self-described "two adorable children" Jane and Michael Banks compose an advertisement for a new nanny. They specify that she must be "kind and witty, very sweet and fairly pretty" and, unlike the recently departed Katie Nanny, she must "never smell of barley water."

However, other things related to barley were another matter. In one episode in the story, Mary Poppins takes her charges to a sweet shop to buy gingerbread. The proprietor, Mrs. Corry, snaps off a few of her fingers that magically morph into barley sugar candy, a caramel-like confection popular in England. The children are both amazed by the feat and pleased with the treat.

Barley is actually a member of the grass family, and archaeologists have found evidence of it in the wild from North Africa and Crete in the west all the way to Tibet in the east. But it was farmers from a much narrower stretch of land — from the Fertile Crescent to the Mediterranean — who domesticated it. Sci-

entists have confirmed that barley has been cultivated in Syria as far back as 10,000 BCE.

The grain served as a foundation of our ancestors' diet because it is nutritionally rich, containing good amounts of B vitamins, vitamin E, iron, zinc, magnesium, phosphorus and selenium, as well as small amounts of copper, manganese and calcium. And it was easy to grow, resilient in both the searing desert heat and the winter cold.

And while the substance may or may not smell good (perhaps it just reminded the Banks kids of the hated nanny), barley water has been used for thousands of years by many peoples to alleviate intestinal distress.

Since barley was the major grain of the time, it is not surprising that it features in the narratives of some of the world's major religions. The Torah mentions it frequently, and all of the references to it make it clear that its preservation was critical. For example, the Book of Exodus, in recounting the 10 plagues brought upon the Egyptians, tells of a "pounding rain of hailstones" by which the "barley was smitten." Losing an entire harvest of a critical part of a people's daily diet would have been devastating.

Beginning on the second night of Passover, Jews begin to count a period of 49 days, called the omer, coinciding with the ancient grain harvest and commemorating the daily sacrifice of barley brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. Until the priest waved the first sheaf of barley, nobody was permitted to partake of the new grain harvest. On the 50th day, they offered the first fruits of wheat at the Feast of Weeks, known by Christians as the Pentecost.

Although the Christian Pentecost festival doesn't involve actual grain at all,

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## Barley risotto

Serves 6

Barley's ecru hue can look rather blah on a dinner plate, but this colorful no-rice risotto will not only brighten your dish, it will satisfy your hunger.

- 6½ cups broth
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 yellow onions, finely chopped
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 cups pearl barley, rinsed and drained
- 2 portobello mushrooms, stemmed, gills scraped, caps sliced
- 1 cup frozen peas
- ½ cup diced red pepper
- ½ cup diced orange pepper
- ¾ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese, plus 3 tablespoons
- 3 tablespoons chopped chives
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley

Bring broth to simmer in medium saucepan.

Reduce heat to low, cover to keep warm.

Melt 2 tablespoons of the butter in a large, heavy pot over medium heat.

Add onion and garlic; sauté until tender, 7-9 minutes.

Add barley; stir until coated with butter, about 1 minute.

Add ½ cup broth; simmer, stirring often, until broth is absorbed, about 3 minutes.

Add remaining broth ½ cup at a time, allowing broth to be absorbed before adding more and stirring frequently until barley is tender but still firm to bite and risotto is creamy, about 45 minutes.

Add peas and peppers.

Meanwhile, melt 2 more tablespoons of the butter in medium skillet over medium-high heat.

Add mushrooms and sauté until soft, about 6-8 minutes.

Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Add mushrooms, the ¾ cup Parmesan cheese, chives and parsley. Stir to combine.

Stir in last 2 tablespoons of butter.

Divide risotto among bowls, sprinkle more cheese over the top of each, and serve.

the first fruits of the barley harvest have been likened metaphorically to Jesus. Corinthians 15:20 says that Jesus has "risen from the dead and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."

Hindus regard barley as the "king of grains." The Hindu festival of Dashain that celebrates the victory of good over evil begins with the sowing of corn and barley in a jar, in a ritual of germination known as Jamara (barley shoots). Ten days after the sowing, community elders offer the Jamara to the children. Aside from its nutritional benefits, Ayurvedic medicine claims that the barley shoots will both make Hindus sacred and protect them from evil while traveling.

Barley is a significant grain both nutritionally and culturally for Buddhists as well. They use tsampa flour, made from roasted and ground barley, in religious rituals as a sacrifice when praying to the gods for protection. When celebrating happy occasions such as weddings, births and the Tibetan New Year, they toss tsampa into the air. And Buddhists observe a 49-day period of mourning for loved ones by burning the tsampa.

The Prophet Muhammed is said to

have enjoyed barley in its many forms and promoted it as a way to keep up energy during the strenuous fasting during Ramadan. He is also quoted as prescribing talbina, a mixture made from powdered barley, milk and honey, for the sick and grieving. Over 20 hadiths (prophetic Islamic writings) feature references to barley.

Barley has been such an essential component of the world's nutrition that it came to signify a standard in many other areas of life. A single grain of the cereal is called a barleycorn, and beginning in medieval times it referred to a unit of length. This measure evolved into the familiar system of inches and feet we use to this day, whereby an inch consisted of three barleycorns. In fact, shoe sizing is still based on the barleycorn standard. In other areas of measurement, the barleycorn grain evolved into the "gram" for weighing items in the metric system.

While barley is most often seen as an ingredient in recipes for soups, stews and bread, it is also an unseen basis for liquid refreshment. The Japanese toast grains of barley to make a refreshing tea called mugicha. For a beverage with more punch, the ancient Egyptians cer-

tainly knew that barley is one of the four essential ingredients in beer. In fact, they made beer that was so highly valued that it was used as both an offering to the gods and as wages to workers. Archaeologists have also found that beer was entombed with wealthy Egyptians for them to enjoy in the world beyond.

Beer isn't the only potable that uses barley. Although U.S. government regulations require that bourbon made in this country contain at least 51% corn, barley is an important ingredient in the mix.

And Scotch whiskey depends on malted barley to produce a nutty, smoky quality to the liquor.

Speaking of malted barley, that product forms the basis of some of our favorite childhood treats: Ovaltine and chocolate-covered malted milk balls.

But back to the ancients. They wasted nothing and found many non-culinary uses for the grain. After winnowing the seeds from the plant, they dried the stalks into straw for weaving into mats, baskets and shoes. And although probably not practical in our neck of the woods, barley stalks tied into bunches made excellent thatch for the roofs of their houses. ■

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