

## *A Little on Kamut®*

Kamut (pronounced “Ku’*mool*”), an ancient relative of modern durum wheats, began its colourful North American history in 1949, when a U.S. airman living in Portugal received 36 giant wheat kernels from a friend claiming to have discovered them in an Egyptian tomb. The seeds were sent to a Montana wheat farmer and subsequently grown and marketed as “King Tut’s Wheat”, but as the novelty wore off, the grain disappeared into obscurity. A small remaining jar of the grain was eventually purchased by the Quinn family, who registered it as “QK-77” and began growing it in 1977. They named the grain “Kamut”, the ancient Egyptian word for “wheat”. Growing market interest in the grain eventually led to scientific studies that confirmed its hypoallergenic and nutritional properties. The QK-77 grain is now a protected variety registered with the Plant Variety Protection Office of the US Department of Agriculture. Exclusive contracts with Montana Flour and Grains determine Kamut production in the United States. These contracts require organic certification of the crop along with specific agronomic production practices.

Scientists disagree over the taxonomy of Kamut, which has been identified alternately as *Triticum khorasan*; *Triticum turgidum*, ssp. *polonicum*; *Triticum turgidum*, ssp. *turanicum*; and, more recently, as *T. turgidum*, ssp. *durum*, due to its similarity to, “Egiptianka”, a modern Egyptian wheat cultivar. Kamut, an “open wheat” that easily loses its husk during harvesting and threshing, is thought to have originated at the same time as other precursors to conventional open wheats. It is characterized by kernels roughly twice the size of conventional wheat kernels, a distinctively hump-backed grain, and a large, loosely-packed inflorescence (seed head). The relatively high level of lipids in Kamut account for its nutty, buttery flavour.

Most scientists also disagree with the claim that the grain was found in a tomb and instead feel that peasant farmers growing a variety of traditional crops were responsible for the survival of the ancient grain over the millennia. During the fifty years since the inception of industrial agriculture, governments have encouraged the production and development of high-yielding grain varieties, especially new strains of wheat, which has led to the near-disappearance of ancient grains. Heritage varieties of all crops are an important genetic resource since they were originally grown under, and are well-adapted to, organic conditions. The loss of heritage crops in favour of those requiring high chemical pesticide, fertilizer and fossil fuel inputs is increasingly being recognized as a serious biodiversity issue.

New wheat varieties tend to be developed with three main criteria in mind: yield, disease resistance and technological characteristics (i.e. suitability for commercial baking). These emphases have led to a decrease in the nutritional value of conventional wheat and a higher proportion of insoluble proteins (i.e. glutenin and gliadin, which comprise gluten) relative to that of ancient grains. Nutritional analyses of Kamut and conventional wheat have shown Kamut to be 20-40% higher in protein, but with a higher proportion of water-soluble proteins such as albumin and globulin. Since research results indicate that allergic reactions may be caused by the gliadin fraction of wheat gluten, the hypoallergenic properties of ancient grains such as spelt and Kamut may be due to differences in the gliadin ratio of these grains.

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