



QUINOA

When I moved to Ecuador to live in the Andean mountains in 2004, I wasn't expecting much from the diet. After all, Ecuador is not a country that is widely known for its fine cuisine. So, one overcast and wet afternoon, when I was offered 'sopa de quinoa' as the traditional soup of the day to have with my lunch in a small café in the mountain town of Saraguro, I wasn't expecting much. I had no idea what quinoa was. To my surprise, the soup was delicious. Amid the chunks of fresh carrots, onions, and fresh green leafy vegetables, was a sea of what looked like tiny beige noodles that reminded me of the couscous I had grown to savor in Togo, West Africa. Little did I know that I was eating an ancient food that had been an integral part of Andean cultivation for at least 7,000 years and was a staple of the Inca diet.

Quinoa, which means 'mother grain' in the Inca language, is still very much a part of the Ecuadorean diet today and is served in mountainous, coastal and jungle regions alike. The word grain is misleading since, in actuality, Quinoa is a seed and is one of the most nutritionally complete foods available. Its high protein content is exceptional in that it also provides a source of all the essential amino acids, in particular lysine that is important for muscle growth and repair. In fact, its essential amino acid composition is the most complete of any plant species consumed by humans. Compared to barley, wheat or corn, it is lower in sodium and higher in calcium, potassium, magnesium, iron, copper and zinc and tops them all when it comes to fiber content. Quinoa also contains a number of potent antioxidants such as flavonoids that have been associated with a reduced risk cancer, heart disease, asthma and stroke. Quinoa is also gluten free making it an excellent source of nutrition for individuals with both mild and serious gastrointestinal disorders such



as celiac disease. Best of all, this little seed can be cooked in fifteen minutes, used in a variety of recipes and is quite filling due to its high water retention.

After a satisfying lunch, I walked across the town's central park to flag down the crowded bus that would take me back to the remote community of Tena where I was living. As we wound our way through narrow, bumpy mountain passes, I thought of the Inca messengers known as chasquis, famous for their speed and endurance, who may well have raced down that very same road as their empire swept across to conquer their neighbors to the north. I wondered how they managed to run such long distances. Now, I think I may have a clue.