

Upon the Fields of Barley

by John Rizzo

About half of all barley harvested in the United States is used as livestock feed and about one quarter of it is used for malting – a key ingredient in whisky and beer. Barley, a cereal grain with a nutlike flavor, is also popular in soups, stews, and breads. Known for its slightly chewy texture, barley is one of the oldest domesticated grains known to man.

Possessing the many healthy benefits of whole grains, such as high fiber content, niacin, manganese, and phosphorous; barley is also very rich in selenium. Selenium, proven to significantly reduce the risk of colon cancer, coupled with the high fiber content of barley, makes this a great natural choice to aid in the prevention of cancer. Additionally, barley, like other whole grains, can reduce the risk of high blood pressure and heart disease. Its high magnesium content aids in the body's secretion of insulin and can lower the risk of Type 2 Diabetes. Barley, rich in Niacin (a B Vitamin), can also protect against cardiovascular risk factors by reducing overall cholesterol and Lipoprotein levels.

Barley can be purchased in various forms. Most commonly are:

- **Hulled.** This is the most natural form of barley where only the outermost hull is removed. Often referred to as dehulled, this is the only form that is legally allowed to be called "whole grain".
- **Pearl.** This is one of the most common forms of barley on the market. After refining, pearl barley has now lost its hull, the bran layer, and part of its endosperm layer. Although it's now less chewy and cooks much quicker, it has also lost many of its healthy nutrients.
- **Pot/scotch.** The hull is completely removed and only a small amount of the bran is polished off. From a nutritional standpoint it is a much better choice than pearl barley but is still not considered a whole grain.
- **Flakes.** Similar to rolled oats, these sliced grains can be made from hulled, hullless, or from pearl barley
- **Grits.** Toasted and cracked barley which is can also be produced from hulled, hullless or pearl barley. Like the flaked barley, the nutrition level will depend upon the source.

With the explosion of whole grains to the market over recent years, barley still seems to take a back seat to wheat, oats, rice and corn. But if you're looking for something different, this grain, although not as versatile as the aforementioned, is very good braised in soups or stews. The below recipe may be very different from what you might expect to do with barley, but can certainly add something different and healthy to your diet.

Barley and Wild Mushroom Pilaf

Yield: 6 Cups

Olive oil	2 TBL	Bay Leaf	1
Barley, Pearl or Hulled	1 Cup	Wild Mushrooms*, ¹ / ₂ inch dice	2 Cups
Celery, Diced	¹ / ₂ Cup	Parsley, chopped	2 TBL
Onions, Diced	¹ / ₂ Cup	Salt & Pepper to Taste	¹ / ₂ Tsp.
Chicken Stock~	3 Cups		

**Wild Mushrooms: any combination of portabella, Crimini, oyster, or porcini*

~chicken stock: the amount of chicken stock can vary depending upon the form of barley used. Hulled will absorb more liquid than pearl.

Bring the chicken stock to a simmer and hold on low heat. Meanwhile, heat the olive oil in a large skillet and sauté the barley until it begins to brown and emits a nutty odor. (This will help seal the starch within the grain and keep it from becoming sticky as well increase the flavor of the grain.) Add the onions and celery and cook for about 2 additional minutes. Transfer the mixture into a 2¹/₂ quart baking dish. Add the hot chicken stock along with the mushrooms and bay leaf to the mixture; mix well.

Cover the dish tightly and bake for at least one hour then check the barley's texture. If it's somewhat soft and a little chewy it's done. If necessary add additional chicken stock or hot water and cook until it reaches the desired texture. Remove from the oven and mix in the parsley before serving.