

How to Cook Rice and Grains

Start by ignoring the directions on the box. Then consult our guide to match the right grain with the right cooking method. BY SEAN LAWLER

About Rice

Color: All rice starts out as brown rice. For white rice, the fibrous bran layer and underlying germ are milled off—along with nutrients and natural oils. Less nutritious? Yes, but it's also more shelf-stable than the brown stuff.

Size: It matters. Long grain, medium grain, and short grain are three loosely defined categories based partly on length-to-width ratios, partly on texture and starch content, all of which determine how the rice cooks up.

Texture: Fluffy, sticky, or in between. The texture of cooked rice depends on the ratio of two starch molecules: amylose and amylopectin. High-amylose rices cook up firm, fluffy, and distinct; high-amylopectin rices come out tender and sticky. The former usually require more water (and cooking time) than the latter.



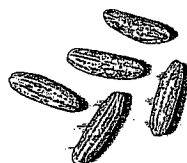
LONG GRAIN



MEDIUM GRAIN



SHORT GRAIN



BROWN RICE

LONG GRAIN

Includes most generic supermarket rice, as well as basmati (an aged extra-long-grain rice from India), Texmati (a domestic alternative), and fragrant Thai jasmine

How It Looks: Slender, elongated, four to five times longer than wide

How It Cooks: High amylose means a light, fluffy texture with firm, distinct grains, making it especially good for pilafs and salads. Some cooks use the "absorption method," but to our minds, just adding water is a missed flavor opportunity. We prefer the "pilaf method," a sauté-based method that brings out toasted, nutty flavors.

MEDIUM GRAIN

Includes generic medium-grain rice and specialty rices for dishes like risotto (Arborio) and paella (Valencia)

How It Looks: Fat, chalky grain, two to three times longer than wide

How It Cooks: Higher in amylopectin, medium-grain rice is tender and a bit sticky and resists turning hard and crunchy as it cools (unlike long grain). It's versatile stuff. When simmered, the grains clump together, making it a good choice to accompany a stir-fry. But it also takes well to the pilaf method, especially in risottos and paellas.

SHORT GRAIN

Includes sushi rice

How It Looks: Opaque, almost round grains

How It Cooks: The softest, stickiest grain of the bunch (cooked), thanks to low amylose and high amylopectin. These qualities make it ideal for tossing with a light vinegar dressing and wrapping up in sushi rolls. Often steamed, but the basic "absorption method" works so long as the simmer is gentle.

BROWN RICE

How It Looks: Light brown bran layer intact (a few greenish grains are normal)

How It Cooks: The bran layer, valued for its fiber content, is also something of a nuisance: It slows absorption (brown rice takes nearly twice as long to cook as white) and cooks unevenly on the stovetop (we prefer the oven method). Whether short, medium, or long grain, brown rice has a pronounced chew, nutty flavor, and distinct grains.

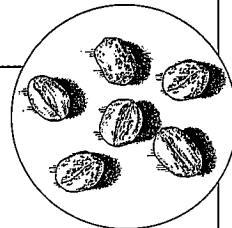
About Other Grains

Dining on barley or bulgur was once strictly vegan territory. No longer. Thanks to wider availability, even confirmed carnivores are giving alternative grains their due as worthy side dishes. Here are some of the test kitchen's favorites.

PEARL BARLEY

Hulled whole grains of barley with the bran polished off.

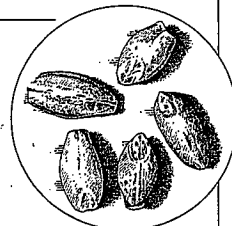
Chewy, with a mildly sweet, nutty flavor. A nice addition to hearty soups.



WHEAT BERRIES

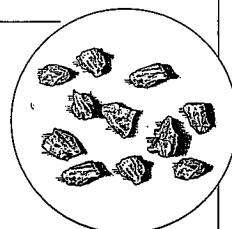
Not berries at all, but whole, husked wheat kernels with bran layer and germ intact.

Cooked wheat berries are firm, distinct, and quite chewy, making them great for cold salads.



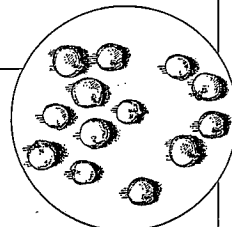
BULGUR

Wheat berries that have been precooked, dried, stripped of their bran, and crushed into pieces. Commonly used to make salads like tabbouleh, this quick-cooking grain is not the same as cracked wheat, which has not been precooked.



QUINOA

This spinach relative is sometimes called a "supergrain" because it contains eight essential amino acids. The tiny seeds expand to four times their original size during cooking and turn out very light and fluffy.



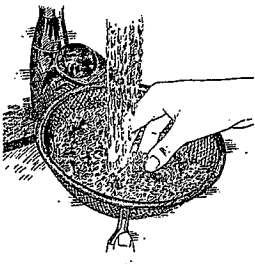
WILD RICE

A difficult grain to categorize, wild rice is not quite the same as the domesticated rices described at left, although recent genetic research shows that they have much in common. "Real" wild rice is hand-harvested from lakes and rivers and costs as much as \$9 per pound. We prefer not-so-wild wild rice—cultivated in man-made paddies—which has a more resilient texture and a much lower price. Cook wild rice at a bare simmer and check it often: It can go from chewy and underdone to mushy and "blown out" in a matter of minutes.

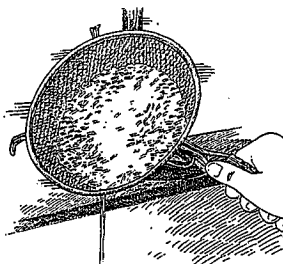


To Rinse or Not to Rinse

For the fluffiest long-grain rice, rinse grains to remove some of the surface starches. Medium- and short-grain rices, by contrast, are supposed to be a bit sticky, so don't bother. Rinsing brown rice is pointless—with the bran layer intact, there's no exterior starch to wash away. Always rinse quinoa to remove saponin—a natural but bitter coating that protects each grain.



RINSE rice under cold water in mesh strainer, stirring gently, until water runs clear.



TILT strainer to drain rice thoroughly.

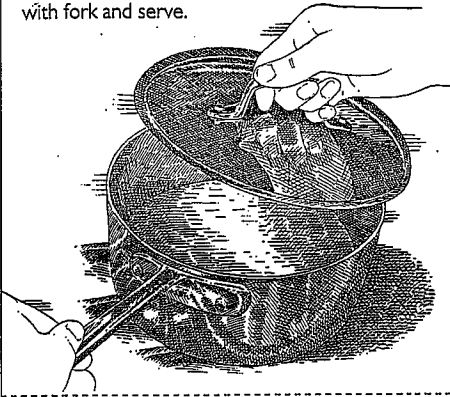
Keys to Stovetop Success

1. **Pick the right pot.** Use a sturdy, heavy-bottomed pot with a tight-fitting lid, preferably nonstick. Grains cooked in a flimsy pot may scorch. To ensure that the pot is big enough for the grains to cook evenly, dump the raw grains into the pot: If the grains are more than 1½ inches deep, switch to a larger pot.
2. **Go low.** Bring the water to a boil, cover, then turn it down to a bare simmer. If more than a wisp or two of steam escapes, the flame is too high.
3. **Don't stir.** Rice will release extra starch, and other grains may break.
4. **Keep a lid on it.** Don't start checking for doneness until near the end. Each time you remove the lid, you release moisture, and the grains may turn out crunchy.
5. **Give it a rest.** Especially important with rice. Letting it stand for 10 to 15 minutes covered, off heat, allows the starch granules to firm up so they won't break.

FOUR METHODS FOR COOKING RICE AND OTHER GRAINS

Absorption Method

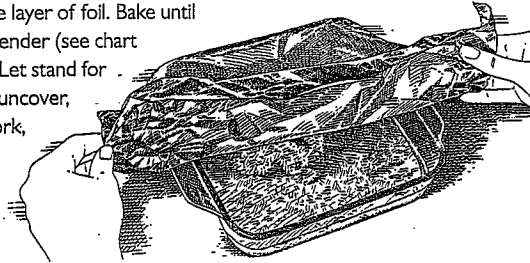
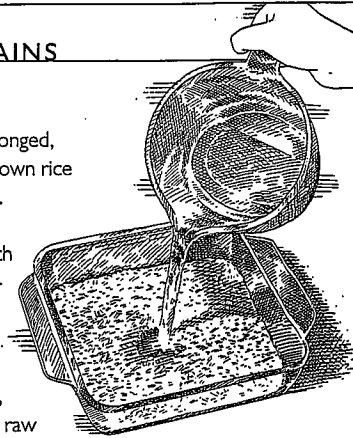
Grains are covered and simmered slowly in a measured quantity of liquid until tender. Combine grains, liquid, and salt (½ teaspoon per cup of raw grains) in heavy-bottomed saucepan. Bring to boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, until grains are tender (see chart for times). Let stand off heat, covered, 10 to 15 minutes. Fluff with fork and serve.



Oven Method

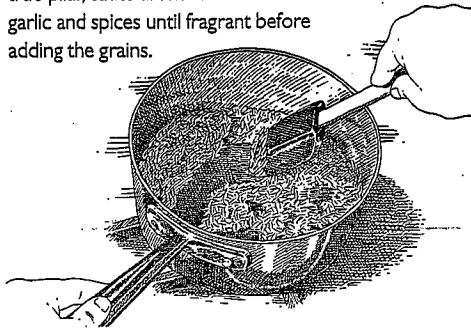
Best for situations requiring prolonged, even heating, such as cooking brown rice or larger quantities of white rice.

1. Heat oven to 375 degrees with rack in middle position. Bring liquid to boil, covered, in saucepan over high heat.
2. Combine grains, boiling liquid, and salt (½ teaspoon per cup of raw grains) in baking dish and cover tightly with double layer of foil. Bake until grains are tender (see chart for times). Let stand for 5 minutes, uncover, fluff with fork, and serve.



Pilaf Method

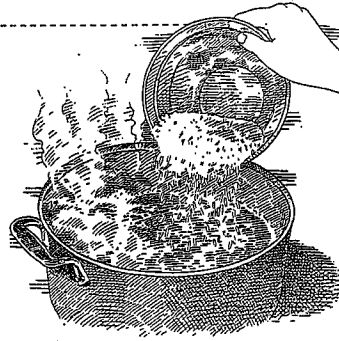
Cooking grains in hot butter or oil briefly before adding liquid to impart a toasted, nutty flavor. To make a true pilaf, sauté aromatics like onion and garlic and spices until fragrant before adding the grains.



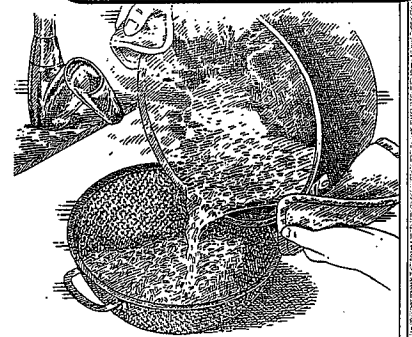
1. Heat butter or oil (2 teaspoons per 1 cup raw grains) in saucepan over medium heat. Add grains and cook, stirring, until grains become chalky and opaque and stop sticking to pan, about 3 minutes.

Pasta Method

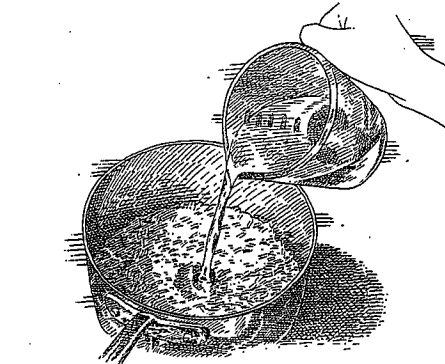
Grains are cooked like pasta—in an abundant quantity of salted, boiling water. Best method for very firm, chewy grains or for recipes in which a softer texture is desired, such as cold salads.



1. Bring 4 quarts water to a rapid boil over high heat. Add grains and 2½ teaspoons salt, reduce heat, and simmer until grains are tender (see chart for times).



2. Drain grains in strainer set in sink. Let stand in strainer for 5 minutes before using or spread out on parchment paper-lined baking sheet to cool.



2. Add liquid and salt (½ teaspoon per 1 cup raw grains), increase heat, and bring just to boil. Reduce heat to low, cover, and simmer until liquid is absorbed and grains are tender (see chart for times). Let stand off heat, covered, 10 to 15 minutes. Fluff with fork and serve.

Cooking Rice and Other Grains (for 1 cup raw)

GRAIN	RINSE?	BEST METHOD	WATER	COOKING TIME	YIELD
long-grain rice	yes	pilaf	1½ cups	18–20 min	3 cups
medium-grain rice	no	pilaf, absorption	1½ cups	16–18 min	3 cups
short-grain rice	no	absorption	1¼ cups	16–18 min	2¾ cups
brown rice	no	oven	1½ cups	1 hr	2½–3 cups
pearl barley	no	pasta	4 quarts	25–30 min	3½–4 cups
wheat berries	no	pasta	4 quarts	1 hr	2–2½ cups
bulgur	no	absorption*	1½ cups	15 min	2–2½ cups
quinoa	yes	absorption	2 cups	15–20 min	3 cups
wild rice	no	absorption**	2 cups	35–45 min	3 cups

*Modified: Add bulgur to boiling water, then let steep, covered and off heat, for 15 minutes. **Drain wild rice of excess liquid before using.