



Building a Better Skillet Dinner with Sustagrain® Barley

Frozen skillet dinners provide quick, convenient meal solutions. But today's consumers want it all: convenience, great taste and improved nutrition. To win this tricky trifecta, try barley instead of ordinary white rice or noodles.

Barley's pleasant, mild flavor and al dente texture lands it somewhere between white and brown rice. Elizabeth Arndt, manager, product development, ConAgra Foods, Inc., Omaha, NE, describes it as a "grainy, slightly sweet, malty taste that goes well with any savory or sweet application." Plus, this versatile grain packs a nutritional punch, especially its beta-glucan soluble fiber. Regular whole-grain barley contains 17% total dietary fiber (TDF) and 5% beta-glucan, and ConAgra Mills has developed a waxy, hul-less variety, Sustagrain®, with 30% TDF and 15% beta-glucan.

Different barley forms can be substituted for rice. Hulled barley retains the nutrient- and fiber-rich bran, giving it a high nutritional value and brown color. Familiar pearled barley is milled to remove the bran. This strips off some nutrients, but the small, pale-colored grain still contains more fiber than brown rice, which has a 3.5% TDF. Hulless barley bypasses the hull-removal step resulting in a tan-colored whole-grain form that, according to Arndt, has a hearty texture similar to wild rice. Lightly milled Scotch barley retains some bran. Flaked rolled barley is steamed and flattened, similar to rolled oats. Steel-cut barley's kernels are cut into several smaller pieces, and Todd Dick, food technologist at ConAgra, considers it virtually indistinguishable from brown rice in a prepared skillet-dish application.

Barley cooks up much like simmering rice, absorbing about 3.5 to 4 times its weight in water. Cook time varies with type. For example, Dick notes that the company's hul-less whole grain form cooks in 45 minutes to an hour, the steel-cut version in 30 to 40 minutes, and the thick flake in 20 to 30 minutes. After microwave or conventional cooking, it "has very good freeze/thaw stability and maintains its structure and texture," he says, making it ideal for anything from a 100%-barley to a multigrain or mixed barley-and-rice frozen entrée.



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