



Native American

# Superfoods



Latin American superfoods are among the most sought-after nutrient-rich ingredients across the globe, thanks to the region's varied landscapes and biodiversity. Despite the high demand, however, the region's superfoods have not reached their untapped potential in the local market.

## A Backyard of Superfoods

What's premium to Americans is just a common edible in Latin America. Superfoods can be found in the backyards of many Latin communities to the point of being a staple ingredient in many of their cuisines. For example, the protein-rich quinoa is often used in soup in Ecuador.

"These ingredients have become quite common in food recipes in Latin America and some, such as quinoa and chia, have almost become a kind of staple ingredient in categories like bread," said Brazilian food expert Cristina Leonhardt. "So, we can assume that the Latin American consumer knows these ingredients and is willing to try them or even expect them to be present in some foods."

## The ++Most Popular Native American Superfoods

### 1. Beans

Beans are rich in essential proteins, which is why many Americans include them in their diet to get their recommended 25 to 38 grams of fiber every day. Historically, this superfood has also been used as a companion crop for maize, as beans provide amino acids to make maize grow much more organically.

### 2. Cacao

Cacao has a rich history in Native American cultures, as it was mainly consumed by the elite such as the Aztec emperor Montezuma, who was rumored to drink nearly 50 glasses





of hot chocolate every day. Cacao trees were traditionally cultivated by the Maya and Aztecs, but evidence shows that superfood were first domesticated in South America. Throughout time, cacao was used as a prized drink for the upper class, thanks to its invigorating properties.

### 3. Maize

The crop we know as corn is believed to have originated in the Southern Americas about 8,000 years ago, where ancient Mexican civilizations domesticated a wild grass called teosinte. Unlike today, this superfood wasn't eaten fresh and was instead dried to turn into flour for tortillas, corn breads, and corn mush.



### 4. Tomatoes

Tomatoes are known for their major dietary source of lycopene, which helps reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer. In the ancient Aztec language, this superfood is called tomatl and records show that they were first domesticated in Mexico around 7,000 years ago. For Europeans, however, it took them centuries to appreciate the blueberry-sized fruit, as it was related to the poisonous nightshade.



### 5. Chile Peppers

Chile peppers, scientifically known as capsicum annum, have been used for both food and traditional medicine. It is believed that wild peppers were first domesticated in Mexico, but Aztecs gave this superfood the name chili in Nahuatl, the Aztec language.



### 6. Potatoes

Going on a potato diet can help you lose weight, restore gut health, and boost immunity, as the humble potato contains every essential vitamin. This superfood was first cultivated in Peru about 8,000 years ago and was a staple crop of the Inca. Native Americans also used potatoes among other roots and vegetables to reduce erosion and conserve water by planting them on terraced plots on the hill.



## 7. Squash

Squashes were prized by Native Americans for their proteins and nutrients. Winter squashes take a long time to mature and are typically high in fiber, vitamin A and potassium, while summer gourds are rich in B vitamins and vitamin C. Ancient civilizations have also used this sisterhood of superfoods as containers and water jugs due to their hard and sturdy shells.



## 8. Blueberries

While native to North America, blueberries were introduced to South America in the 1980s as the region was looking for new fruits to crop. The flavorful blueberries are very high in vitamin content, fiber, and antioxidants.



## 9. Oregano

Oregano is both medicinal and highly nutritious and can be found in warmer parts of Native America. This herb contains a number of phytonutrients that serve as potent antioxidants that can prevent oxygen-based damage to cell structures in the body. This superfood has also been used by many as part of their diet because of its potent source of iron, manganese, and fiber.



## 10. Avocado

Avocado is one of the most popular superfoods around the world, particularly in the Americas, as it was first cultivated in Central America 5,000 years ago. This delicious and nutritious fruit is also a good source of vitamins, magnesium, and dietary fiber. Americans mainly use avocados to add to their savory meals because its creamy texture absorbs more nutrients than any other fruits and vegetables.







## Bringing Superfoods Into the Modern Era

Since Latin healthy foods are ingrained into the culture, many youngsters have a preconceived notion that it's just an ingredient that parents buy to add to their dinner. Local superfood startup LiveKuna is pushing to make superfoods accessible to a larger audience by adding them to snacks and breakfast cereals.

“In Brazil, at least, I don't see that these ingredients are used because of some specific nutrient, but more because the whole ingredient is associated with healthier eating,” Leonhardt said. “Açaí has long been associated with a healthy, sports lifestyle and the fact that it is packed with antioxidants doesn't hurt but I don't see that as the major driver in its consumption here.”



Still, many superfoods are unheard of to the common folk such as pequi, a pulpy orange fruit that resembles mangosteen to licuru, a native Brazilian coconut; or jaboticaba, a grape-like fruit, to babassu, an oil-rich palm nut with a slight almond flavor.



Premium condiment maker SoulBrasil would blend new and unknown ingredients with established ones to make them more appealing to the public. For instance, they mix well-known superfoods such as açaí, guarana, acerola, and mango with lesser-known ingredients such as tonka bean, murupi pepper, and jiquitaia pepper.



“Some local ingredients have become very common in their countries but we can also see that there is room for new good-for-you, superfood ingredients from other regions [such as] moringa, green tea, and goji berry,” she said.

## Respecting Food History and Culture

Superfoods are valued in Latin American cultures for how easy it is to grow them, so many companies make sure that their business model is sustainable.



SoulBrasil, for example, also works with indigenous communities to source the native Amazonian ingredients for its jams, chili sauces, and fruit-based vinegars. Not only does it guarantee its customers fresh products, but it also compensates and respects local farmers.

Meanwhile, Rio de Janeiro-based company Juçaí makes an organic sorbet using berries from the juçara palm, a tree native to the Brazilian Atlantic rainforest. The juçara palm is endangered because its heart is considered a delicacy but harvesting its heart will kill the palm.

The company aims to get the juçara palm off the endangered list within a decade, as well as dethrone açai as Brazil’s favorite superberry by investing in a reforestation program. They also pay fruit pickers more for the berries than they would receive for the heart and distribute palm seeds to farmers for free.

“We should not forget that we host, as a region, the biggest diversity in the world, much of it unknown. So, my bet is that there is still a lot to be found and researched in the Amazon or the Cerrado region.”

Latin American superfoods no doubt have incredible health benefits, but it’s also important to look at its rich history and how we could help to make the likes of quinoa, chia, and maqui sustainable for future generations.

