

# Why Americans should eat lentils every day

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(Illustration by Emily Sabens/The Washington Post; iStock)

Lentils conceal their superpowers with a dowdy exterior. Pound for pound, raw lentils have more protein than steak. While not as protein-dense once cooked, they pack even more iron than meat, in addition to other vitamins and minerals.

Fast to cook, easy to store and exalted enough to be buried with the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, these seeds have sustained empires. Roman soldiers lived on the essential portable protein over their long campaigns.

Today, the lentil is again on the front lines. This time, against climate change. While start-ups scramble to engineer a sustainable protein, from lab-grown meat to fake burgers, lentils are a ready solution, one with a proven record.

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The rest of the world has known this for millennia. From India's red lentil to the French Le Puy to black "beluga" lentils, so named for their resemblance to caviar, the world grows about 6 million tons every year. Unlike corn and other grains, lentils can thrive on arid lands with little water where many other crops wither — while building up the soil.

When it comes to combating climate change, the lentil may be the perfect legume. They're also, as the caviar mention implies, delicious. So why do Americans eat fewer lentils than almost everyone else?

Here's how you can return the lentil to its rightful place at humanity's table.

How much protein do lentils have?



Threshing lentils on a Nile farm in Egypt. (Published 1904) (Courtesy of Library of Congress)



Pulses for sale at a market in Guwahati, India, in 2019. (Biju Boro/AFP/Getty Images)

Lentils are pulses, or the edible seed of a legume plant. This category of dry beans or seeds — as opposed to fresh green beans — encompasses everything from black beans to chickpeas to pigeon peas. They're older than agriculture, as archaeological evidence suggests humans collected wild varieties more than 13,000 years ago.

There's a good reason. While not as dense or digestible as meat once they are cooked, lentils become a complete protein similar to meat when combined with many grains. They're also a slow burn, satiating hunger for hours.

And unlike red meats, particularly those that have been processed, lentils have none of the saturated fats and additives that raise the risks of cancer and heart disease. They also contain iron, zinc, magnesium, potassium and vitamin B, as well as most of the essential amino acids.

"That's one of the beauties of lentils," says Bruce Maxwell, a plant ecologist at Montana State University. "It's really high in the precursors for human health."

### **How much lentils Americans eat**

Yet legumes remain sparse in the American diet, says Tim McGreevy, CEO of the USA Dry Pea and Lentil Council, a trade group. While Indians consume about 40 pounds of pulses per person annually, and Spaniards come close to 20 pounds per person, Americans remain in the low teens. One study estimated just 8 percent of the U.S. population eats pulses on any given day.

That's changing, as Americans expand their knowledge of lentils beyond the ones most people know: green, brown and red. Hundreds of varieties grown around the world, each with its own terroir, or characteristic flavor imparted by local soil and weather, are making their way to the United States, including the black "beluga" lentils; speckled, dark green French Puy; and large, lighter green Laird gaining popularity.

McGreevy is just waiting for lentils to have their "hummus moment."

For anyone not in the legume industry, the impact of hummus on American pulse consumption is hard to appreciate. While the general profile of legumes has risen alongside the popularity of plant-based food, particularly the Mediterranean diet, it was hummus that ignited Americans' love of chickpeas, and the pulse family more broadly, says McGreevy. U.S. acreage devoted to chickpeas soared from virtually nothing in 1995 to around 1,200 square miles, more than twice the size of Los Angeles, by 2017, though it has since come back down somewhat.

"Hummus was a paradigm shift. It was amazing," says McGreevy. "Hummus is the gateway pulse."

In March 2020, pulses received another boost when much of the United States shut down. During the pandemic, they flew off grocery shelves, and lentils were in particularly high demand. Sara Mader, CEO of Palouse Brand, one of the largest online pulse retailers, says the era of lentil sales can be divided into times before and after the pandemic.

Annual sales of its brown Pardina lentil rose 860 percent after shutdowns in March 2020, compared to a year earlier. They haven't slowed much since. Lentils are now one of Palouse Brand's top three sellers, Mader says.



What's good for you is also good for the land. America's most popular crops, like wheat and corn, often degrade the soil over time. Legumes like lentils rebuild it.



That's what happened on Mader's family farm, which grows crops under the Palouse Brand name. For 125 years, the family has farmed the rich soil of Washington state's eastern flank, which has sediment deposited there after the last ice age. But after a century of cultivation, the region's fertility was eroding fast. So in the 1930s, Mader's family tried something different. They rotated chickpeas, peas and lentils into their wheat fields. By the 1980s, they also adopted no-till farming, leaving organic matter on the surface instead of plowing it.

While uncommon at the time, the Mader family's embrace of legumes in Palouse, Wash., was prophetic. Today, about a third of the farm is always planted with legumes. And farms like Mader's in North America now produce more than half the world's crop of lentils in fields stretching from the Pacific Northwest to Canada's interior.

That's rebuilding the region's soil, and lowering carbon emissions. Lentils, like almost all legumes, pull nitrogen out of the air and deposit it underground, thanks to bacteria on their roots. Not only does this fertilize the legumes, it also enables the soil to hold more nutrients and water for the next crop, displacing carbon-intensive nitrogen fertilizers. Even better, lentils generally need no irrigation, surviving on rainfall alone.

Farmers across the region now rotate lentils into their former monocultures of wheat. Mader says the soil health on her family's farm is better than it has been in anyone's lifetime. And we'll need more farms like hers.

In 2019, the EAT-Lancet Commission, a collaboration by dozens of leading scientists, designed a diet capable of sustaining 10 billion people and the planet by 2050. The findings, peer-reviewed by the respected British medical journal Lancet, recommended doubling the amount of legumes in our diet, roughly equal to the amount of animal protein.



“Food is the single strongest lever to optimize human health and environmental sustainability on Earth,” the scientists wrote.

If there’s a challenge for lentils in the United States, it’s that their biggest fans don’t live here. McGreevy says North American farmers are still shipping about 55 percent of their crop overseas, often to India and Europe.

To expand lentils across the United States and Canada, farmers need a stable domestic market.

Steve Sando is proving it’s possible. The founder of the heirloom bean purveyor Rancho Gordo, he has turned the humble bean into a coveted crop. Growing up in California’s wine country, he wondered why legumes weren’t accorded the same regard. So he started Rancho Gordo, sourcing and selling tasty beans from around the world. His “Bean Club” started as a joke, inspired by Napa’s pricey wine clubs. It now claims 20,000 members, with even more people on the waiting list.

Yet as a child, even Sando disdained lentils. “I grew up on old bins of brown lentils at the food co-op,” he said. “I hated them.” That echoes many first impressions of the pulse: mushy, tasteless and boring. But new varieties and exciting preparations are on hand.

There's the lentil-rich burger at the Burger Stand in Taos, N.M., topped with feta and roasted red pepper sauce. Refried lentils have been a crowd favorite at Viva, a Las Vegas Mexican restaurant. Barbecue lentils. Chocolate lentil brownies. Old-world classics like lentils and carrot salad with mustard vinaigrette, and lentil mushroom ragout. And of course, my favorite: braised lentils with red wine, heavy on the pour.

Sando is a convert. Not only does Rancho Gordo sell multiple varieties of lentils, Sando also eats them regularly as an indulgence — never as a sacrifice. “I’m an omnivore, but I love them so much I just eat less meat,” says Sando. “Food should be joyful, not penance.”

Could they ever become as American as apple pie? McGreevy says it's just a matter of time.

Not a day goes by when he doesn't have a bowl. “I really have lentils for breakfast every morning,” says McGreevy, who cooks a pot each Sunday, enough for the entire week. “It sounds crazy, but my wife and I put a little butter and salt and pepper on them with an egg. I can go well past lunchtime before I need a snack. They just carry you a long way.”