

Grain Bowl Templates

Grain bowls are ideally suited for quick at-home meals—and not just because they are a great way to re-use leftovers. They follow a formula rather than a recipe (although some components may involve a recipe). Basically, it's this:

whole grain + vegetables + protein + sauce/dressing + garnish

A few examples from each group:

- **Whole grain:** Quinoa, emmer farro, einkorn, spelt, whole grain sorghum (as opposed to pearled), whole grain barley (again, as opposed to pearled), bulgur wheat, freekeh, Kamut wheat, brown rice, black rice, red rice, wild rice.
- **Vegetables:** Prepare a batch of roasted Brussels sprouts, broccoli, cauliflower, asparagus, fennel, and so on, but also add some chopped, shredded, or thinly sliced raw veggies. Think red or green cabbage, carrots, dark leafy greens (spinach, kale, chard, mustard greens, shredded Brussels sprouts, or anything else that strikes your fancy).
- **Protein:** Go plant-based with beans (white, black, pinto, etc.), lentils (French green or black beluga), chickpeas, edamame, baked tofu, or tempeh. Or, go animal-based with roasted chicken, leftover steak or fish, or even canned tuna or salmon.
- **Sauces & Dressings:** Lemon or lime juice, vinegar, olive or nut oil (walnut and hazelnut are especially good), hummus, garlic-tahini dressing, pesto, salsa, hot sauce, harissa or soy sauce. If you are packing your grain bowl to go, it can handle being dressed in advance.
- **Garnishes:** These include healthy fats from chopped tree nuts (walnuts, almonds, pistachios, pecans, etc.), peanuts, seeds (sunflower, pumpkin, sesame, etc.), sliced or diced avocado, as well as flavor-rich elements like olives, capers, fresh or dried herbs (oregano, dill, thyme, cilantro, parsley), spices (cumin, paprika, sumac, crushed red pepper), aromatics (garlic, onion, scallions, chives), cheese, and pickled onion or radish.
- **Optional extras:** Get creative! A few ideas are hardboiled eggs, cubed and roasted sweet potatoes or butternut squash, and jarred or canned peppers (roasted red peppers, banana peppers, jalapenos), sun-dried tomatoes, fresh or dried fruit.

Grain bowls are a fabulous foundation for experimenting with global flavors. These are two of my current favorite bowl “recipes.”

Mediterranean Grain Bowl

Cooked whole grain (ex: farro)
Cooked chickpeas (or bean of choice)
Roasted Brussels sprouts (or broccoli)
Quick-pickled onions
Roasted red peppers (from a jar, cut into strips)
Hummus (homemade or purchased)
Fresh flat-leaf parsley
Olive oil
Fresh lemon juice
Ground sumac
Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

Latin Grain Bowl

Cooked whole grain (ex: brown rice, quinoa)
Cooked pinto beans (or black beans)
Thinly sliced red cabbage
Quick-pickled onions
Optional: Cooked, cubed chicken breast
Shredded cheddar cheese (or queso fresco or cotija)
Avocado, sliced or diced
Fresh cilantro
Green salsa
Fresh lime juice
Salt and freshly ground pepper

Grain Bowl 101

Prep ingredients in advance. If you try to prepare all the parts of a grain bowl shortly before you plan to eat it, I guarantee that will be the last bowl you ever try to make at home. For easy weekday meals, do some of this prep work on the weekend:

- Cook grains and beans
- Roast vegetables
- Prepare ingredients like hummus and pickled onions
- Wash greens
- Pre-chop or shred some raw veggie ingredients

Let family members customize. One reason that grain bowls are so popular in school cafeterias and restaurants alike is the ability to customize—whether it’s tweaking a set menu item or building a bowl from scratch. Set out the component parts and let each eater assemble as desired.

Arrange, don’t mix. Part of a grain bowl’s appeal is the visual distinctiveness of its various parts—toss it all together, and it’s no longer eye candy. Even when the flavors of each ingredient are complimentary, they are also distinct from one another. Let yourself decide which elements you want to combine with each forkful.

Build flavor into every layer. Grain bowls can be a symphony of flavor—or as dull as dishwater. A common misstep is to add sauces, seasonings and flavorful garnishes on top of a bowl full of unseasoned main ingredients. That doesn’t work when you aren’t mixing everything together. A few flavor builders:

- Cook whole grains in half chicken or vegetable broth, and half water.
- Soak dried beans overnight in brine, then cook
- Roast vegetables with olive oil, salt and granulated garlic
- Flavor hummus with garlic, lemon juice, salt, cumin and sumac
- Add quick-pickled red onions for a sweet-sour hit of vibrant crunch

Vary your textures and temperatures. Soft and crunchy, warm and cool, tender and crisp. When your bowl is a study in contrasts, it’s more satisfying.

Recipes

Brined Beans

If you flavor the water that you're brining the beans with, or cooking the beans in, they'll absorb those flavors. On the other hand, if you buy a can of already cooked beans, they've already absorbed all the water they can hold, so the flavors of anything you heat the beans with won't actually get into the beans. Brining also has the benefit of reducing "burst" beans, without significantly increasing the sodium content of the beans.

1 pound dried beans (about 2 cups)

3 tablespoons + 1 teaspoon salt

4 quarts (16 cups) water

Optional: flavoring agents (peppercorns, herbs, sliced onion, peeled garlic cloves)

1. Add salt to water and stir until mostly dissolved. Add beans and any other flavoring agents. Soak for about 16 hours.
2. Drain and rinse the soaked beans.
3. Next, you can cook the beans in one of two ways:
 - a. Transfer the drained beans to a Dutch oven along with 4 quarts (16 cups) water and 1 teaspoon of salt. Bring to a boil over high heat, cover, and transfer to a preheated 325 degree F oven until the beans are firm-tender, about 40 to 60 minutes. Oven cooking also helps reduce "burst" beans.
 - b. Transfer the drained beans to a large heavy pot with 4 quarts (16 cups) water and 1 teaspoon of salt. Bring to a boil over high heat, boil for two minutes, then reduce heat to a simmer, skimming any foam off the top. Cover partially and simmer until the beans are firm-tender, 30-90 minutes
4. Allow beans to cool in their broth, then use or refrigerate.

Quick-Pickled Onions

Pickled onions add zip to pretty much anything—grain bowls, salads, sandwiches. This version of quick-pickled onions is especially quick!

1 medium red onion, about 5 ounces, very thinly sliced into rings or half-moons

1/2 cup rice vinegar, white vinegar, or apple cider vinegar (or a combination)

1/2 cup water

1/2-1 teaspoon sugar, honey or maple syrup

1 teaspoon fine sea salt

Optional: red pepper flakes, peppercorns, small dried chilies

1. Pack the onions into a 1-pint mason jar or similar heat-safe vessel. Place the jar in the sink, to catch any splashes of hot vinegar later.
2. In a small saucepan, combine the water, vinegar, maple syrup, salt, and pepper flakes. Bring the mixture to a gentle simmer over medium heat, then carefully pour the mixture into the jar over the onions.
3. Use a butter knife or spoon to press the onions down into the vinegar and pop any air bubbles in the jar. Let the pickled onions cool to room temperature (about 20 to 30 minutes), at which point they should be sufficiently pickled for serving.
4. Cover and refrigerate leftover pickled onions for later. Quick-pickled onions are best consumed within three days, but they keep for 2 to 3 weeks in the refrigerator.

Roasted Vegetables

Roasting brings out the natural sweetness in veggies and gives them a nicely chewy texture. Tossing the veggies in oil before roasting promotes browning and adds flavor. I like to make big batches and use the leftovers cold in lunch salads, reheated with the next night's dinner or mixed into scrambled eggs in the morning. Most veggies will take about 30 minutes, kale leaves (for kale chips) take less time. There's no one perfect temperature to roast at. I usually use between 350-450 degrees. This allows you to roast the vegetables in the oven at the same time as something that might have a specific temperature requirement. If you like your veggies more crispy—or need them done faster--go for the higher end.

1. Pre-heat oven
2. Cut vegetables into about the same size pieces.
3. In a large bowl, toss the vegetables with enough extra-virgin olive oil or avocado oil to lightly coat, then season with salt and pepper.
4. Spread the vegetables in an even layer on a rimmed sheet pan or in a shallow roasting pan. Don't overcrowd the vegetables, or they'll steam instead of brown.
5. Check every 10 minutes, stirring or toss the veggies so they cook evenly.
6. When they are done to your liking, remove from the oven and serve!

Mediterranean Hummus

Store-bought hummus has nothing on hummus you make at home. You get the best flavor and texture if you soak and cook dried chickpeas, but if that feels like too much of an obstacle, don't hesitate to use a can of chickpeas.

1 cup dried chickpeas
2 tablespoons salt, divided
1/2 cup tahini
2-4 garlic cloves, peeled.
3 cup fresh lemon juice, or more to taste
1 teaspoon sea salt, or more to taste
1/2 teaspoon cumin, or more to taste
1/2 teaspoon sumac, optional
1/2 cup ice water
Olive oil for serving

1. Add 1 1/2 tablespoons salt to water and stir until mostly dissolved. Add chickpeas and soak overnight, or longer.
2. Drain the chickpeas and put them in a large saucepan with 1/2 teaspoon salt and 6 cups of cold water. Bring to a boil, skimming off any foam that rises to the surface, then reduce heat to medium-low. Simmer with the pan partially covered until the chickpeas are very tender (almost, but not quite, mushy) which may take up to an hour. Drain the chickpeas.
3. Add the chickpeas and garlic, lemon juice and salt to a food processor or sturdy blender (like a Vitamix). Process until the chickpeas form a stiff paste, then with the machine running, add the tahini, salt and spices.
4. Drizzle in ice water and continue to mix until the hummus is smooth and creamy, scraping down the sides of the bowl occasionally.
5. Taste for seasoning, adding more salt, lemon juice or spices as desired.

Shopping List

- Farro/Emmer
- Brown rice
- Dried chickpeas (garbanzo beans)
- Dried pinto beans
- Brussels sprouts or broccoli
- Red cabbage
- Fresh flat-leaf parsley
- Fresh cilantro
- Lime
- Lemon
- Avocado
- Cheese (cheddar, queso fresco or cojita)
- Hummus (homemade or prepared)
- Vegetable or chicken broth
- Green or red salsa
- Roasted red peppers (jarred)
- Tabasco or other Mexican hot sauce
- Olive oil
- Granulated garlic
- Sumac
- Salt
- Pepper

Quick pickled red onions:

- 1 medium red onion (about 5 ounces by weight)
- 1/2 cup rice vinegar, white wine vinegar or apple cider vinegar
- sugar

If preparing hummus from scratch, add

- Cooked chickpeas
- Tahini
- Garlic
- Additional 1-2 lemons

Whole Grain Resources

Oldways Whole Grains Council : <https://wholegrainscouncil.org/>

Cookbooks

- Everyday Whole Grains by Ann Taylor Pittman and Hugh Acheson (Cooking Light)
- Simply Ancient Grains by Maria Speck