Sixteenth-century explorers may not have found their El Dorado in South America, but 21st century scientists are striking gold as they uncover the healing powers of foods from the mountains and rain forests. "South America's vast biodiversity has attracted researchers to look into the benefits of native foods," explains Antonio Fernandes de Carvalho, PhD, professor at the University of Viçosa in Brazil. "The interest is helping save natural habitats. The foods' popularity allows farmers to cultivate indigenous crops rather than giving over the land to corn or soy fields," he adds. For North Americans, this means new foods to try, with impressive health benefits. "As we look to other cultures that have fewer chronic health problems, South America provides unadulterated foods that can also add variety to the diet," says Gerard E. Mullin, MD, director of Integrative GI Nutrition Services at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. The following six superfoods have made it on to the radars of cooks and health experts in the United States. They're easy to use, chock-full of good-for-you compounds, and absolutely delicious.
PAPAYA-AVOCADO SALAD

Serves: 4 • Vegan • 30 minutes or fewer

When buying ripe papayas, look for firm (not hard) fruit with a yellowish rind that has no spots or bruises.

4 ripe papayas, divided
2 small avocados, diced (1 cup)
1/2 cup unsalted cashews, chopped
1/4 cup coarsely chopped cilantro or fresh mint
3 Tbs. fresh lime juice
1 medium shallot, finely chopped (2 Tbs.)
1 cup packed arugula, coarsely chopped

1. Halve 2 papayas and scoop out seeds. Set halves aside. Peel remaining 2 papayas with vegetable peeler, then halve and scoop out seeds. Cut peeled papaya halves into 1/2-inch dice, and place in medium bowl.

2. Add avocados, cashews, cilantro, lime juice, and shallot to diced papayas in bowl, and toss to combine. Season with 3 Tbs. fresh lime juice, 1/4 cup chopped cilantro, and 1/2 tsp. salt. Toss again. The salad is now ready to serve.

PER SERVING: 252 CAL; 8 G PROT; 11 G TOTAL FAT (4 G SAT. FAT); 15 G CARB; 1 MG CHOL; 325 MG SOD; 9 G FIBER; 19 G SUGARS

THE super SCOOP

PAPAYA • The first explorers of Central and South America were enthralled by the flavor of papaya that they took the seeds with them on the trade routes that spread to India, Asia, and the South Pacific. The fruit’s orange flesh is an indicator of its nutritional value. “Papayas are rich in carotenoids, the orange plant pigments the body converts into vitamin A,” explains David Grotto, RD, LDN, author of 101 Foods That Could Save Your Life. “Half a papaya also contains one and a half times the amount of vitamin C we need in a day.” In addition to being vitamin rich, papayas contain papain, an enzyme that acts as a digestive aid.

COCONUT OIL • Until recently, coconut oil was on the list of “bad” oils because its saturated fat content led scientists to believe it contributed to heart disease and high cholesterol. Research now shows that the medium-chain fatty acids found in coconut oil do not raise cholesterol or fat levels in the bloodstream and may actually help prevent chronic diseases. One of the medium-chain fatty acids, lauric acid, is also found in breast milk and is known for its immune-enhancing properties.

EMPANADAS

Makes 24 empanadas

Argentine empanadas are traditionally made with lard, and then deep-fried. Here, coconut oil makes a more healthful choice.

Filling
1/2 cup raisins
1 Tbs. coconut oil
1 small onion, finely diced (1 cup)
1/2 cup finely diced red bell pepper
1 8-oz. pkg. seitan, drained and chopped
1/4 cup frozen corn
1 clove garlic, minced (1 tsp.)
1/2 tsp. dried oregano
1/2 tsp. dried thyme
2 Tbs. chopped green olives
1/4 cup grated low-fat mozzarella cheese

Wrappers
4 cups flour
1 Tbs. baking powder
1 tsp. salt
1/2 cup coconut oil, melted
1/2 cup skim milk

1. To make Filling: Cover raisins with boiling water, and let stand 5 minutes to plump. Drain, and set aside.

2. Heat coconut oil in skillet over medium heat. Add onion and bell pepper; sauté 5 minutes, or until soft. Stir in seitan, corn, garlic, oregano, thyme, and 1/4 cup water. Simmer 5 minutes, or until most of liquid has evaporated. Stir in olives and reserved raisins. Remove from heat, and cool. Stir in mozzarella.

3. Preheat oven to 400°F, and coat baking sheet with cooking spray.

4. To make Wrappers: Whisk together flour, baking powder, and salt in large bowl. Stir in coconut oil. Add 1 8-oz. pkg. seitan, corn, garlic, and oregano. Stir in coconut oil mixture to form a dough, adding up to 1/2 cup more water, if necessary, to achieve desired consistency. Transfer dough to well-floured work surface and roll to 1/4-inch thickness. Cut into circles with 4-inch cutter.

5. Brush edges of dough circles with water. Place 1 Tbs. filling in center of each dough circle. Fold into half-moons, and pinch edges to seal closed. Place on prepared baking sheet, and bake 12 to 15 minutes, or until golden brown.

PER EMPANADA: 143 CAL; 5 G PROT; 5 G TOTAL FAT (4 G SAT. FAT); 19 G CARB; 1 MG CHOL; 188 MG SOD; 1 G FIBER; 2 G SUGARS

According to Gerard Mullin of Johns Hopkins Hospital, the promise is that coconut oil promotes a better balance of LDL and HDL cholesterol. “I give coconut oil a thumbs-up. It tastes rich and people are finding it’s not such a bad thing after all,” he says. Use it in place of oil or butter to sauté, or melt and try in baked goods.

CHILE PEPPERS • Most North Americans associate chile peppers with Mexican cuisine, but cultivation of the flavorful pods originated south of the equator. “Chile peppers are native to the Amazon jungle in Bolivia,” explains Bill Phillips, associate professor of culinary arts at the Culinary Institute of America. “Their history dates back 6,000 years.”

Chile peppers aren’t just a hot commodity in the kitchen. Capsaicin, the compound that gives peppers their heat, also has anti-inflammatory properties. Capsaicin is used in creams and ointments to alleviate arthritis symptoms and chronic pain. “And any anti-inflammatory will prevent clots from forming, and in turn help prevent strokes and heart disease,” explains Mullin.
SPICY BOLIVIAN CABBAGE AND POTATOES

Serves 8 • Vegan • 30 minutes or fewer

Aji chiles, also known as yellow Peruvian chiles, have a hot, fruity flavor similar to Scotch bonnet chiles. Jalapeños can be substituted if you prefer a little less heat.

8 cups shredded cabbage (1 small head)
1/2 lb. small red-skinned potatoes, cut into 1-inch chunks
2 Tbs. tomato paste
1 tsp. sugar
2 Tbs. olive oil

1 large onion, chopped (1 1/2 cups)
1 small yellow or orange bell pepper, finely chopped (1/4 cup)
5 Roma tomatoes, seeded and coarsely chopped
1/2 aji chile or Scotch bonnet chile,
or 1 jalapeño, seeded and finely diced (2 Tbs.)
2 Tbs. lime juice
1/4 cup coarsely chopped cilantro

1. Bring large pot of salted water to a boil. Drop cabbage in water, and blanch 5 minutes, or until crisp-tender.
2. Cook potatoes in boiling salted water 5 to 7 minutes, or until tender. Drain, reserving 1/4 cup cooking water. Stir tomato paste and sugar into cooking water, and set aside.
3. Heat oil in Dutch oven or large saucepan over medium heat. Add onion and bell pepper, and sauté 5 minutes, or until soft. Stir in tomatoes, chile and tomato paste mixture, and cook 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in cabbage and potatoes. Cook 5 to 6 minutes, or until cabbage and potatoes are heated through. Season with salt and pepper, sprinkle with lime juice and cilantro, and serve.

PER SERVING: 137 CAL; 4 G PROT; 3.5 G TOTAL FAT (0.5 G SAT. FAT); 25 G CARB; 0 MG CHOL; 199 MG SOD; 5 G FIBER; 7 G SUGARS
**For more than 5,000 years, quinoa (pronounced KEEN-wah) has been cultivated in the Andes Mountains of Peru, Chile, Ecuador, and Bolivia, where it remains a primary food source. "Quinoa is unique because it contains eight essential amino acids and is a complete protein by itself," says Grotto. "It's also the quickest-cooking whole grain out there."

In addition, a 2007 study at Osaka City University in Japan showed that quinoa is high in antioxidant activity, making it an exceptionally heart-healthy choice. Try substituting quinoa in recipes that call for rice, couscous, or pasta, or cook it like oatmeal for a hot breakfast cereal.

**Acai (pronounced oh-sigh-EE) is a deep purple, berry-like fruit that grows on palm trees in the Brazilian Amazon. Acai may reign supreme among fruits for its antioxidant value based on recent research, Grotto says. "With a score of 6,576 on the oxygen radical absorption capacity (ORAC) test, acai pulp has more antioxidant activity than blueberries, strawberries, and red wine combined."

Just be choosy about which form of the fruit you use. Because it's so fragile, acai is rarely imported in whole fruit form. It's available in pulp, powders, and concentrates, but the pulp is the form most likely to retain the fruit's antioxidant powers. Look for acai pulp in the freezer section of natural-food stores. Add it to smoothies and yogurt, or use it to make ice cream or sorbet the way they do in Brazil.

**Chocolate:** Chocolate is one tropical superfood no one in North America has trouble pronouncing. Scientists seem to be just as addicted to the quest for chocolate's health benefits as consumers are to the sweet treat itself. "Chocolate's heart-protective benefits come from the high flavonoid content of the cocoa bean," explains Mullin. Chocolate flavonoids (plant compounds with antioxidant activity) may help lower blood pressure, according to a 2007 report in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Recommended "dosages" range from an ounce of dark chocolate to a steaming cup of hot cocoa a day, but health experts all agree on one point: The purer the cocoa source, the better the chocolate is for you. "Now they're even saying that chocolate's benefits may not have anything to do with whether you eat dark or milk, but how the cocoa bean is processed," says Grotto.

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**QUINOA**

**PERUVIAN BAKED QUINOA AND CHEESE**

*Serves 8*

Think of this recipe as a protein-packed, gluten-free alternative to mac 'n' cheese.

2 tsp. olive oil
1 medium leek, white and pale green parts halved and sliced (1 cup)
1/2 cup diced red bell pepper
1/2 cup diced green bell pepper
1/2 cups quinoa, rinsed and drained
2 cloves garlic, minced (2 tsp.)
2 large eggs
1 cup nonfat milk
1 1/2 cups grated Cheddar cheese (4 oz.), plus more for sprinkling, optional

1. Heat oil in medium saucepan over medium heat. Add leek and bell peppers; cover, and cook 5 minutes, or until tender. Stir in quinoa and garlic, and cook, uncovered, 3 to 4 minutes, or until quinoa grains turn opaque.
2. Add 3 cups water, and season with salt. Cover, reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer 3 to 4 minutes more, or until most liquid has been absorbed. Remove from heat, and let stand 5 minutes.
3. Preheat oven to 350°F. Coat 13- x 9-inch baking dish with cooking spray. Whisk together eggs and milk in large bowl. Fold in quinoa mixture and cheese. Transfer to prepared baking dish, and bake 30 to 35 minutes, or until browned around the edges and on top.

**PER SERVING:** 241 CAL; 12 G PROT; 10 G TOTAL FAT (4.5 G SAT. FAT); 27 G CARB; 22 MG CHOL; 295 MG SOD; 2 G FIBER; 3 G SUGARS

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**ACAI**

**ACAI SORBET**

*Serves 8 • Vegan*

In its pure state, acai pulp is sour and slightly bitter, but once a little sweetener is added, the flavor resembles concentrated blueberries with a hint of chocolate. "Agave nectar is a good option here because its lower-glycemic-load sugar is a better complement to acai's phytonutrients," explains Los Angeles-based nutritionist Ashley Koff, RD.

4 pure acai pulp smoothie packs (4 oz. each), thawed
3/4 cup agave nectar
2 Tbs. lemon juice

Whisk together all ingredients in bowl. Transfer to 9-inch-square metal baking pan, and place in freezer. Stir with fork every half hour, scraping frozen bits from sides, to keep from freezing into a block. Scoop into bowls, and serve, or store in airtight container up to 1 week.

**PER SERVING:** 132 CAL; 1 G PROT; 2.5 G TOTAL FAT (0.5 G SAT. FAT); 27 G CARB; 0 MG CHOL; 5 MG SOD; 2 G FIBER; 24 G SUGARS
TRIPLE DARK CHOCOLATE TART

Serves 12

Cocoa nibs are roasted cocoa beans that have been crushed into small pieces.

**Cocoa Nib Crust**
- 1 1/4 cups flour
- 1/2 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1/2 tsp. salt
- 6 Tbs. butter, softened
- 1/2 cup confectioners' sugar
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 2 tsp. cocoa nibs, optional

**Fudge Filling**
- 12 oz. bittersweet chocolate, chopped
- 1 12-oz. can reduced-fat evaporated milk

1 Tbs. butter
1 tsp. vanilla extract

1. To make Cocoa Nib Crust: Sift flour, cocoa powder, and salt into medium bowl. Set aside. Beat butter and confectioners' sugar with electric mixer until soft and creamy. Beat in flour mixture just until combined. Add vanilla extract and 2 Tbs. water; mix with spatula until soft dough forms. Wrap in plastic wrap, and chill 1 hour.

2. Preheat oven to 400°F. Use cooking spray to coat 8-inch fluted tart pan with removable bottom. Roll chilled dough to 1/8-inch-thick circle on well-floured work surface. Transfer to prepared tart pan, press in bottom and sides, and trim edges. Use excess dough to repair any cracks or holes. Sprinkle cocoa nibs, if desired, over bottom of crust, and gently press into crust with fingers. Cover crust with parchment paper, and weigh down with uncooked rice or beans. Reduce oven heat to 350°F and bake 7 minutes. Remove parchment and rice or beans, and bake 5 to 7 minutes more, or until dry and pale brown. Cool.

3. To make Fudge Filling: Place chocolate in large heat-proof bowl. Bring evaporated milk to a boil in saucepan. Remove from heat, and pour over chocolate, whisking until smooth. Whisk in butter and vanilla extract. Pour filling into crust, and cool, then refrigerate 2 hours or more. Remove tart from pan, and serve.

PER SERVING: 312 CAL; 6 G PROT; 20 G TOTAL FAT (11 G SAT. FAT); 36 G CARB; 23 MG CHOL; 107 MG SOD; 4 G FIBER; 18 G SUGARS