The New SUPERFOODS

You may not be 100 percent sure of how to pronounce AÇAÍ, GOJI BERRIES, MANGOSTEENS or YERBA MATE (we’ll get to that later). Chances are, you got your first taste of POMEGRANATE JUICE in the past three years. Even SESAME SEEDS and SOUR CHERRIES—which at least sound familiar—probably aren’t mainstays in your diet unless you eat a lot of Middle Eastern food or have a fruit tree in your backyard.

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But if researchers, health experts and some innovative entrepreneurs have their way, these age-old foods from around the globe (pomegranates appear in Greek mythology, the Bible and the Koran, and sesame seeds have been used for centuries on multiple continents) will be as common as cranberries and chocolate—two superfoods you probably consume all the time. Emerging research is finding more and more unique health benefits from each of these seven items—from pain relief and cancer-fighting properties to immune-boosting power. Add to that the high antioxidant activity from the plant compounds they contain, plus off-the-charts levels of essential vitamins (goji berries have more vitamin C than oranges), and you’ve got a group of ancient foods that deserve a modern-day review. To help you figure out what’s what, why each of these is so good for you, how to pronounce their names and—better still—how to start consuming them, we’ve put together this guide to our new superfood faves.

And who knows? In just a short time, you could be putting goji berries alongside the grapes in your shopping cart and swinging by the coffee shop for a yerba mate latte.

AÇAI

Background In the Brazilian rainforest, juice from the açaí (pronounced ab-sah-EE) berry has been used for medicinal purposes for centuries. The tiny, bluish-black fruit from Amazonian palm trees doesn’t travel well, so açaí is found primarily in juice and powdered form outside of Brazil.

Why it’s super Açaí contains 10 times the anthocyanins of red wine. Indeed, açaí berries are “one of the richest fruit sources of antioxidants,” says researcher Stephen Talcott, an assistant professor of food chemistry at Texas A&M University. The juice’s popularity soared last year after word got out that its antioxidant activity might have age-defying benefits. That’s up for debate, but there is scientific evidence for cancer suppression. In a test-tube study performed at the University of Florida, açaí extract destroyed up to 86% of leukemia cells. As of press time, human trials were still ongoing.

How to get more Açaí juice tastes like a strong chocolate-berry combination—delicious to some, awful to others. Drink the juice straight, add it to shakes and smoothies, or try powdered packets and concentrate capsules that can be added to drinks if it’s not to your taste.
YERBA MATE

Background This South American herbal tea (pronounced yerba mah-tay) is more popular than coffee in parts of Argentina and Brazil. Yerba means "herb" in Spanish, and mate means "gourd," referring to the hollowed-out gourd traditionally used to steep and drink the beverage. Like coffee and green and black teas, it contains caffeine.

Why it's super Yerba mate is higher in heart-healthy antioxidants than both green tea and red wine, found a 2005 study by Touro University in Vallejo, CA. The tea stops "bad cholesterol particles (LDL) from oxidation," a process that causes cardiovascular disease, says Alejandro Gugliucci, one of the study researchers. The study was conducted on isolated cells in a lab, not on individuals, so there's no recommended dosage yet. Anecdotal reports tout it as a weight-loss aid (it appears to make people feel full more quickly while eating), and some people say it helps prevent colds and flu and alleviates allergies.

How to get more Yerba mate tastes like green tea, but with a grassy, slightly bitter flavor. Try brewing a weak tea and adding a touch of honey, fresh mint or lemon, or steep it in hot milk instead of water.

SOUR CHERRIES

Background Also known as "pie cherries," tart Montmorency cherries aren't the sweet kind you buy for snacking, but the small, sour ones grown for jams, baking and freezing.

Why they're super Sour cherries are a natural source of the anti-inflammatory compounds found in ibuprofen. Just 12 oz. of Montmorency cherry juice per day can help reduce muscle pain caused by exercise, found a 2006 study conducted by the University of Vermont. Declan Connolly, lead researcher on the study says, "I would absolutely advise people to drink it before exercising." Anthocyanins, the antioxidant pigments in red, blue and purple foods, are credited with sour cherries' pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory properties. Sour cherries have been promoted as a home remedy for gout, a form of arthritis, as far back as the 1950s, but no followup research has supported that claim.

How to get more Although sour cherries are too tart to eat on their own (unless you love sour foods), drinking the juice will give you the same benefits. Try sweetening Montmorency cherry juice with apple juice. Add fresh or frozen sour cherries to smoothies, quick breads, pancakes and, of course, pies.
POMEGRANATES

**Background** Pomegranates hold a prominent place in history: They're mentioned in the Koran, celebrated in the Torah, and speculated to be the original forbidden fruit. (The word "pomegranate" is a derivative of Latin for "seeded apple").

**Why they're super** These juicy, seedy gems have a new role to play as warriors against cancer. A 2006 study conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that consuming 8 oz. of antioxidant-rich pomegranate juice a day can slow the spread of prostate cancer. "I'm not saying it's a cure," says Allan Pantuck, MD, an associate professor of urology and lead author of the study. "But there are a lot of reasons to recommend it and not a lot of reasons to avoid it." Earlier studies also showed pomegranate juice to have significant health benefits in lowering blood pressure and preventing osteoarthritis and heart disease.

**How to get more** Drink the juice straight, or use it to flavor sparkling water. Sprinkle pomegranate seeds over salads and Mexican dishes, or use as jewel-like decorations for cakes and tarts.

SESAME

**Background** Sesame seeds have been grown for thousands of years. Turks and Persians used sesame oil in lieu of olive oil, Egyptians ground the seeds into flour, and Indians, Africans and Chinese used them whole.

**Why it's super** You'll never look at the dainty seeds the same way again once you've learned how good they are for you. Sesame seeds contain high amounts of lignans, the same compounds in flaxseeds that may help women balance hormone levels. Eating 1½ oz. of ground, toasted sesame seeds (about 2 Tbs.) can lower cholesterol levels and may reduce the risk of heart attack, according to a study published in *Nutrition Research* in 2005.

**How to get more** Roll bread dough and cookies in sesame seeds for a nice nutty flavor. Whisk tahini, a ground sesame paste, into salad dressings. Toasted sesame oil has the same benefits—use it in salad dressings or to season Asian dishes.
**MANGOSTEEN**

**Background** Mangosteen is a deep reddish-purple fruit with a hard, woody rind that grows in subtropical climates. It's prized in Southeast Asia and South America for its soft, snow-white segments with a delicate floral flavor and a texture akin to a plum (and no, it's not related to the mango). But don't go looking for mangosteens in the produce aisle: The US Department of Agriculture prohibits importing the fresh fruit, which can harbor pests (though you can sometimes find frozen whole mangosteens in Asian markets).

**Why it's super** A study conducted at Ohio State University and published in March 2006 examined mangosteens' high levels of xanthones, certain antioxidant compounds occurring in greater amounts in the rind and seeds of this fruit than any other. These xanthones combat inflammation and free radicals (harmful ions that can contribute to cancer). The antioxidant levels found in mangosteen products are incredibly potent, believes A. Douglas Kinghorn, professor at Ohio State's College of Pharmacy and lead researcher on the study. "If you drink a small amount of mangosteen liquid, it will have positive effects in terms of cancer prevention. I think it's the most promising thing to come along in a while," he says.

**How to get more** Be sure to look for mangosteen juice that's made from the whole fruit (it's the rind that contains a great deal of the fruit's benefits). The juice has a tart, full-bodied flavor and rich, red color. Since it's still new to the US, the juice can be expensive, so sip it straight in small quantities or try one of the new juice blends instead of OJ in the morning. Add a dash to smoothies or dilute it with water or sparkling water.
GOJI BERRIES

Background TIME magazine called goji berries (pronounced GO-gee) "the breakout fruit of the year," but these raisinlike dried "wolfberries" (their other name) have been used for centuries by Chinese cooks in healing soups and stews. Buddhist cooks also use rehydrated goji berries as a meat substitute in dumplings.

Why they're super "Goji berry is a truly unique discovery," says Nicholas Perricone, MD, dermatologist and author of Dr. Perricone's 7 Secrets to Beauty, Health, and Longevity: The Miracle of Cellular Rejuvenation. According to Perricone, gojis may be the only food known to stimulate the secretion of human growth hormone, which is thought to inhibit classic signs of aging, including wrinkles and susceptibility to disease. The berries also contain numerous healthful properties: They have more vitamin C than oranges, more beta-carotene than carrots, more iron than soybeans or spinach, and are exceedingly high in antioxidants that boost the immune system.

How to get more Dried berries are readily available in Asian markets (where they're also less expensive than in some health food stores). Aside from munching on a handful of dried berries, try plumping them in boiling water, then using them the same way you'd use raisins or dried cranberries (they taste like a slightly floral combination of the two) in cookies, cakes, oatmeal, yogurt or cereal. The juice has a mild flavor; drink it on its own or add it to a smoothie.
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