

Ch-Ch-Ch-Chia!

More than just a hairdo for your favorite '80s ceramic figurine BY VANESSA SALVIA

Eugene chef Beverly Lynn Bennett is on a roll — specifically, a gluten-free, dairy-free roll sprinkled with chia seeds enclosing a veggie burger made with chia seeds, alongside a salad made of chia seed dressing and chia sprouts. Bennett's new cookbook is called *Chia: Using the Ancient Superfood*, and it's all about this member of the mint family.

Since 2005, Bennett has published eight books, including four for the "Complete Idiot's Guide" series. A second

edition of her first book, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Vegan Living*, was published in 2012. "The book offers kept coming," Bennett says. She has written about vegan cooking, gluten-free vegan cooking and vegan slow cooking. Her latest book is a bit of a departure. It's not only the smallest cookbook she's ever done, it's also the first with color photos.

Bennett has been vegan for 26 years. She writes a monthly dairy-free dessert column for *VegNews* magazine, and one of those columns contained her recipe for chia pudding. A publishing company, Books Alive, wrote to her and asked if she would write a chia seed cookbook.

"I eat chia every day," she says, "so I said yes. I love chia!" Books Alive is based out of The Farm, an intentional community since 1971 in Summertown, Tenn. Besides publishing vegetarian and vegan cookbooks and health and wellness books, The Farm is known for having the most comprehensive study of vegan children and birth rates.

Bennett began experimenting with chia while developing recipes for her vegan slow-cooker cookbook. "I started thinking about using it more in savory recipes because it thickens things," she says. "So I said let's try it in dressings or making gravies. I'm always thinking of things for people with allergies and no one seems to have a problem with chia."



Chia is called an "ancient superfood" because evidence indicates that Aztecs and Mayans cultivated chia as early as 3500 BC. Bennett writes in her book that the name of the Mexican state Chiapas is derived from the word chiapan, meaning "river of chia." Chia was consumed as food, as medicine and crushed into oil for use in making body paints.

Today, we eat chia seeds because they are nutrient-packed tiny parcels with the healthy bran, germ and endosperm still intact. Chia seeds are one of the best plant sources of omega-3s, an essential fatty acid. When chia seeds get wet they swell and become slightly sticky, so they can be used as a thickener in lots of vegan recipes.

Bennett's recipes toss chia into everything from smoothies to soups, casseroles and morning muffins. The simple chia seed gel (just chia and water) adds a punch of nutrition to anything it's added to. Seed-crusted tofu cutlets are marinated and rolled in a blend of chia, sesame and hemp seeds and then baked. Served alongside a creamy roasted tomato soup topped with a sunflower and chia seed cream, it's a pretty tasty vegan meal. Because chia is so tiny, it lends itself to being added to other things or as the star of the dish, for any meal of the day.

"I think everybody should try chia seeds," Bennett says. "It's one of those things that doesn't do you any harm, so why not add it to your diet? It fills you up quickly and gives you lots of energy." ■



PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

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