



# All About Acai

**This tiny Amazonian berry packs a serious antioxidant-rich punch.**

*By Rachel Kossman*

Often referred to as a “superfruit,” acai (pronounced *ah-sigh-EE*) was propelled into popularity in the U.S. several years ago when rumors began swirling that the berry offered weight loss benefits. Although little scientific evidence was forthcoming to support these claims, acai has remained a trendy ingredient in culinary recipes and skincare formulas alike. But is the fruit worth the hype? In short: yes. Acai has long been revered by indigenous Amazon peoples, and for good reason. The naturally sugar-free purple berries are packed with a slew of elements that put its berry counterparts to shame.

“The ratio of trace minerals, antioxidants and nutrients within acai is a magical combination,” says Lindsey Bro, food explorer and culinary director for Sambazon, a sourcer and producer of acai products. The dark, fleshy berries are also chock full of vitamins, fiber and amino acids—attributes that have boosted the fruit’s popularity as a skincare ingredient. In fact, acai pairs well with spa offerings, both internal and external.

## SMALL BUT MIGHTY

For centuries, Amazonian tribes have been harvesting acai, which they call *ica-cai*, meaning “the fruit that cries.” Legend has it that an Amazon tribe was running out of food when the chief demanded the slaughtering of all newborns, including a grandchild from his own daughter, Iaca. Laden with grief, Iaca heard phantom cries of her newborn in the rainforest; when she went searching for the child, she stumbled upon a fruit-bearing palm, where she lay down and passed away. The tribe found her body at the base of the tree—saved from starvation, they named the tree after the young woman.

Acai berries flourish on slender, indigenous palm trees that grow in groves in the heart of the Central and South American Amazon. *Euterpe oleracea*, the acai palm, can stand as tall as 100 feet, and is often found near river basins throughout the Southern Hemisphere’s rainforests. The shade-loving tree takes up to

five years to begin producing fruit, which develops a deep blue-purple hue and reaches 1-2 centimeters in diameter. Acai berries' purple-red pulp surrounds a large seed, which constitutes about 80% of the fruit.

During the Amazon's dry season (July to December), acai berries are picked and immediately flash-pasteurized and frozen; when left unprocessed, the fruit quickly oxidizes and loses nutrients. Consequently, the berries themselves are difficult to find in North America. Instead, acai is retailed in the form of juices, capsules, tablets, freeze-dried powders and frozen mixtures.

Native peoples use acai's rind to make a topical ulcer rinse; its oil to treat diarrhea; crushed acai seeds to break fevers; and a concentrated acai root formulation is believed to boost blood production, ease menstrual and muscle pain, and help in cases of jaundice, malaria, liver and kidney diseases, diabetes, hepatitis, hair loss and hemorrhages.

## BOUNTIFUL BERRY

Although there's no proof that acai has any ability to curb weight gain, the fruit is high in vitamins, specifically vitamins B and K, which are known to help the body metabolize carbs, proteins and fats more efficiently.

Indeed, acai's reputation as a nutrient-rich blockbuster appears to be merited. "It's considered a 'superfood' by many—I don't use that term often, but acai really



fits the phrase because it's so rich in healthful nutrients and is loaded with disease-fighting, plant-based phytonutrients," says Los Angeles-based Melina B. Jampolis, MD. "We're learning more and more about the benefits of phytonutrients in both the treatment and prevention of disease," she adds.

Acai's antioxidant levels are impressive too: On the Oxygen Radical Absorbance Capacity (ORAC) scale, acai has the highest value among tested fruits and vegetables, and nearly 10 times the level of wild blueberries. Acai has long been recognized as an energy booster—100 grams (3.5 ounces) of acai contains 13% protein, whereas an egg contains roughly 12.5%. A high content of fatty acids delivers omega-3 to cell membranes, reducing inflammation and signs of aging.

## Spa-friendly Solutions

Check out these recipes for suggestions on how to serve this lovely little superfruit at your spa.

- "When acai is consumed as part of a meal, it's ideal to mix with other protein-rich foods—when combined properly, the acai allows for the absorption of additional vitamins. Acai is incredibly versatile: It can be made savory, sweet or stand-alone, but I prefer using only coconut water, mint and fresh herbs to make very simple acai juices. It's also a great ingredient to mix with earthier-tasting herbs that aren't as palatable in teas, because the flavor of the berry helps cover the punch." —*Lindsey Bro, Sambazon's Food Explorer and Culinary Director*
- "As I saw the popularity of acai rise, especially in Los Angeles, I decided to create an acai bowl for the Wellness section of Culina's breakfast menu. For the base, we combine almond milk, honey and frozen acai pulp, then top the bowl with goji and blueberries, house-made granola, bee pollen and bananas." —*Cyrille Pannier, executive chef, Four Seasons Hotel Los Angeles at Beverly Hills*
- "Acai is naturally sugar free, so many companies add sugar to make the berry more palatable. Instead, I recommend incorporating the fruit into recipes that already contain natural sweetness from other fruits, or adding a little natural, no-calorie sweetener to taste. You can substitute acai berries or powder for any berry in a favorite smoothie recipe. The Super Anti-Oxidant Smoothie I created incorporates the berry with vanilla protein powder, spinach or kale, cold green tea, lemon juice and ground flaxseed." —*Melina B. Jampolis, MD*





Three plant sterols found within acai—B-sitosterol, campesterol and stigmasterol—are believed to have a cardioprotective effect on the body.

The fleshy berry is also high in vitamin C and ellagic acid, an immunity-boosting combination. A 2006 study from the University of Florida published in the *Journal of Agriculture and Food Chemistry* found that polyphenolic compounds extracted from acai reduced cancer cell propagation by up to 86%.

In addition, a 2012 study entitled “Evidence-based Systematic Review of Acai by the Natural Standard Research Collaboration,” published in the *Journal of Dietary Supplements*, found that participants consuming frozen acai pulp twice daily for one month reduced their fasting glucose levels and minimized total and LDL cholesterol levels.

## EXTERNAL REVERENCE

Brazilians and Peruvians have long been eating acai to improve skin health and treat skin conditions, but it's only in the last several years that acai oil has started to crop up in Western skincare formulas, especially anti-aging treatments.

Acai is a naturally moisturizing emollient that helps

restore skin elasticity, acts as an antibacterial and fights free radicals. Because of its wealth of amino acids and antioxidants, acai is an ideal ingredient for skin-brightening formulas, cleansing oils, antiaging face creams, dry or sensitive skin lotions, and lip balms. Formulations that address cellular structure often incorporate acai, as it is one of very few fruits that contains omega-3, -6 and -9 essential fatty acids. Other beneficial skincare components of note include phytosterols, vitamins B<sub>1</sub>, B<sub>2</sub>, B<sub>3</sub>, E and C, and minerals such as phosphorus, calcium and potassium.

If you do decide to use acai in your diet or at your spa, be careful to select only the best quality. “Whatever form of acai is used in skin care, it should be food-grade quality,” reminds Bro. ■

*Rachel Kossman is DAYSPA's senior editor.*

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