

Quinoa's rise and fall

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Farmers on the altiplano of Peru saw their income from quinoa increase by almost 900% between 2007 and 2014. The boom was followed even more quickly by a bust.

Emma McDonnell is a cultural anthropologist who watched quinoa's rise and fall firsthand. Her book *The Quinoa Bust* tells the story.

Quinoa is just the latest in a long line of superfoods touted as the solution to rural poverty, sustainable development and the nutritional health of people who eat too much anyway. Emma McDonnell agrees.

Emma: That's part of why the book is titled *The Quinoa Bust: The Making and Unmaking of a Miracle Crop*, because I wanted to make a case about the kind of illusion of the miracle crop. So, you know, starting in the early 20th century, some Andean nutrition scientists and agronomists started studying quinoa, right? It had not been studied prior to that in any rigorous way, and found, you know? Wow, this crop is incredible nutritionally. It's incredible agronomically. You know, this could be used to address global hunger. And other folks, you know, thought, well, this could be an income opportunity in, you know, really poor regions of Peru where, you know, none of the agricultural products are kind of worth very much on the market. If we turn this into an export crop, which of course, it became, this can solve poverty in the Andes. There was so much kind of hope attached to quinoa and, you know, I think that, as you said, quinoa is in a long line of crops like this, you know, and I think that they're captivating and attractive because it simplifies what are really complex problems, right? To think of something like poverty or hunger or climate change adaptation as having an antidote. There's something so attractive about that. And we're sort of, it feels like we're sort of constantly captivated by the dream of the miracle crop and somehow have this sort of amnesia where we're not able to kind of recognise that this is ... It's always ... It's not going to live up to expectations.

I don't think that that means that these crops don't have potential to do good things in the world. And I certainly think that quinoa has done lots of good, good things, had real impact. But I think that the fantasy of the miracle crop is ... Kind of inhibits our ability to address these problems, the kind of gravity of these problems.

Jeremy: Tell me about the Puno. Where is it? What's it like?

Emma: Yeah. So the Puno Region of Peru is located within the Andean altiplano. This is a very high altitude region that lies sort of across the borders of Peru, Bolivia and just a small sliver of Chile. So this is a region where altitudes are, you know, around 4000 metres up to 5000 metres above sea level. And so you can imagine that agriculture is really challenging in this region. That's part of why quinoa is so important here, is because it's one of few crops that can thrive in a region that has relatively little oxygen, and all the sort of environmental factors that come along with extreme altitude. It's also one of the poorest regions of Peru. So this is an area where average annual incomes in rural areas is about \$400 a year. So this is an area that is relatively poor, livelihoods are largely based in agriculture or the mining sector.

Jeremy: Your book is called *The Quinoa Bust*, which kind of presupposes a quinoa boom. Did you foresee the bust coming? What got you into it?

Emma: So I started this research as the quinoa boom was starting to crest. So I started the project in 2013, 2014 is considered kind of the height of the quinoa boom price wise, and it's in 2015 that the price starts to fall. So yeah, I admit I didn't see the bust coming when it did. Um, I think myself and really, anyone in the industry knew that the kind of high prices that they were seeing in 2012, 2013, into 2014, were not going to last forever. But no one that I spoke with had ... Had imagined the kind of drama of the bust, how dramatically the price would fall and how soon it would happen. So yeah, I started the project thinking I was studying a commodity boom. And lo and behold, I was studying a boom bust trajectory, which, of course, in retrospect, seems like, maybe I could have known that that was coming.

Jeremy: At the start of the boom, there were some people, particularly in the UK, who who said, you know, the problem with this boom is that the farmers can no longer afford to eat quinoa. And that

was kind of pretty comprehensively disproved by economic studies. But you want to say that those studies miss the point somewhat, that ... That the boom and the bust, it wasn't so much about okay, there was income, now there's no income, but people are still doing okay. So what were the kinds of more nuanced changes that you documented?

Emma: There are a couple different angles I would come at this question from. One is about the ways that I think that the media coverage in 2011, 2012, that was making that case, that farmers are no longer eating quinoa because of the quinoa boom, sort of overdramatised a dynamic that did exist, that quinoa's high price did mean that some people were temporarily unable to afford it. So this dynamic was concentrated among urban poor. So folks who were purchasing quinoa on the market. At the same time, speaking with farmers about their own lives and how the quinoa boom had affected their own day to day practices, I did not meet a single farmer during my time in Puno that said that they stopped eating quinoa at any point. So that's, you know, has to do in part with the centrality of quinoa in people's diets that it's not something they're just going to kind of drop. And also the fact that, you know, when you're selling quinoa for export, the exporters are not generally going to buy all of your quinoa. There's usually some quinoa that doesn't make the ... doesn't meet the quality parameters. There's generally some quinoa that you're just going to save for your own consumption no matter what the price is, basically.

Jeremy: So how did the fact that it turned into a bust, how did that affect your research?

Emma: From a pragmatic perspective, it was really challenging to kind of reimagine my project in some ways. So if you can imagine, you know, I started this work building a network with quinoa buyers, quinoa processors and farming organisations. And at the height of the boom, right, this was a time when these organisations had funding to, you know, bring me along on various things. Right. There was kind of room in the pickup truck for me, for ... For the buyers. And that was something that really helped me kind of get access to this kind of interesting world of quinoa buying. So then when I returned in 2016 for a year of field research, some of those businesses had already closed, right? So some were closed and some were basically facing major budget cuts. So one of the groups that I worked a lot with had

sold their fleet of pickup trucks. And so their buying staff, what are called Técnicos, were using sort of public transportation and other means like that. That meant that going to visit farmers was like a multi-hour thing to visit a farmer, and they would often sort of stay in the countryside overnight. And I was basically told, look, there's just not resources for me to add to the plates of these técnicos to kind of deal with your own wellbeing and whatnot. And so I had to kind of remake my social network which, you know, at the time was really kind of challenging.

And in retrospect, it also gave me different angles to understand this phenomenon, because the folks that I ended up building relationships with in the bust had kind of different perspectives on things that I wouldn't have gotten if I had stayed with that original organisation that, you know, ultimately did end up closing. From a more analytical angle, I would argue it made the project more interesting and more sort of relevant that ... You know, there actually is a good bit of anthropological research on commodity booms. There's much less on the bust. You know, I think that there's the kind of excitement and enthusiasm of a boom. It's interesting, people want to talk to you about it. And yet the bust is always there. But researchers often kind of have kind of already turned away, have already kind of wrapped up the project and moved on to something else. And so I think that from an analytical perspective, it made the research much richer. It also made the story a bit sadder and and darker, you know. I think if I had ... Let's say I had, you know, ended my field research in 2014, you know, the book would have had a happy ending. The ending now is much more ambivalent, you know.

Jeremy: It's interesting because, sort of not at the beginning of the boom, but one of the things that got the boom going was ... You talk about efforts to whiten the nature of quinoa. What do you mean by that? And how was it done?

Emma: Yeah. So one of the chapters of the book is about the way that quinoa was repackaged for audiences within Peru. So, you know, there's a good bit of research that is about the ways that sort of distant, wealthy consumers have come to have desires for products linked to indigenous identity, linked to kind of ideas of exoticism, authenticity. And I was interested in something slightly different here. It was not kind of how did Europeans and North Americans come to find quinoa compelling? But how did middle and upper classes within

Peru, who historically shunned the grain, how did they come to integrate quinoa into their diets? So over the course of Spanish colonialism ... Quinoa, which, you know, prior to that, had been a really important part of diets across the Inca Empire, a very valued and esteemed crop. We know this from various different historical sources and archaeological evidence too. But over the course of Spanish colonialism, quinoa came to take on this identity as a quote unquote, Indian food. So it came to have these associations with indigenous identity, with poverty, with kind of rural identities. So quinoa, along with some other foods as well — alpaca meat is another example — come to be used as sort of tools to distinguish sort of coloniser from colonised. So quinoa has this identity as a sort of Indian food. Middle and upper classes, especially in the coastal regions of Peru, do not historically eat quinoa, and this begins to change quite, quite drastically.

And I argue that there are a few different drivers of this change. One of these was the increased interest among foreign consumers, especially wealthy North American and European consumers, that that helped kind of make quinoa palatable to wealthier audiences within the Andes. But some other things were going on too. Much of the packaging for quinoa in Peru — and packaging for quinoa was really only developed at the very earliest in the late 1980s. Prior to that, and really, most quinoa through to this day is sold kind of in open air markets in a sack where, you know, someone measures out for you a kilo or two kilos of quinoa. There is no kind of branding. But that began to change with the kind of spread of supermarkets and some companies that were creating packaged quinoa. And one of the, one of the patterns in these packages is references to the Inca. So the idea of quinoa as the grain of the Inca. And to, you know, a foreign consumer, the association with quinoa and the Inca might be a sort of idea of exoticism, you know, the kind of the interesting and very different Inca Empire. But within Peru, the connotation is actually a bit different. So, the Inca have this sort of majestic and royal connotation. And the Inca is also considered in some ways kind of elite and white. I argue there is a sort of clear kind of strategy going on. And I don't mean to say that that people were articulating it in exactly this way, but a strategy of distancing quinoa from actually living indigenous people and connecting it to the royal Inca Empire. And that that was a kind of subtle but important distinction that was made in quinoa packaging, to make it palatable to audiences who otherwise sort of

feared associations with indigeneity, actually living indigenous people in the Andes.

Jeremy: Isn't that strange, because the Inca are no less indigenous than the people currently growing quinoa? It's a little odd, isn't it?

Emma: Yeah. I mean, I think that all societies have these kinds of contradictions. And I think that this is one particular example. But I, you know, I think that the ways that we sort of imagine race tend to have these sorts of strange contradictions.

Jeremy: In a way, the rapid price rise, the boom, sort of sowed the seeds of its own destruction. But how? Why was it that the price plunged so, particularly after 2014?

Emma: So quinoa's price historically was very low, right. That begins to change, 2008 is when we start to see the price ticking up as interest among consumers outside the Andes just begins to kind of grow. But as quinoa's price gets higher in 2013, lots of farmers, especially along the coasts of Peru, who had historically not produced quinoa, become interested in growing this crop, right. The price is really high. Peru's coast, by the way, is a very temperate climate, right? It is not high altitude. It's sort of balmy all year round, sort of agriculture is easy in a number of ways. It also has, you know, large scale irrigation infrastructure. This is really different than the kind of agricultural landscape in the Andean highlands.

So these are more agribusinesses than small farmers. And so these folks start replacing the crops that they're growing — you know, bell peppers for export, whatever — with quinoa. Okay. And so in a single season between 2013 and 2014, the total amount of quinoa produced in Peru more than doubles because of the sort of dramatic expansion of quinoa outside its native Andean region. So effectively this creates a production glut, right? So even as demand for quinoa globally is continuing to grow and grow quickly, production increased so fast that it outpaced that demand and generated a price fall.

That is the story within Peru, you know. Some kind of nuance to add is that at the same time, quinoa production is developing outside the Andes. So there's, you know, commercial quinoa production now in Canada. That was also something that was just starting at that time in the US and various European countries. So effectively the Andean producers in the Altiplano in Peru and Bolivia suddenly have to

compete. And, you know, one figure that I think is really telling is that ... So a kind of good yield in the Andean altiplano for quinoa is 1000 kg per hectare. That's, you know, that's not anything to kind of write home about, so to speak. But like, that's, you know, it's a solid year. In Peru's coast, farmers were quoting 7000 kilos per hectare, effectively. Suddenly these Andean producers are competing with folks that are just kind of in a different league, so to speak, a different kind of agricultural system.

Jeremy: Yeah. One of the other things that you document in the book is the sort of — I don't know whether to call it a scandal or a misfortune — but these container loads of quinoa that were sent back because they contained pesticide residues. And this wasn't just sort of from the coastal plain where farmers might have been accustomed to using those chemicals. It was also quinoa that was certified organic. That can't have helped.

Emma: Yeah. This was the kind of overlapping crisis with the price fall, was the contamination crisis. And they were really concomitant. They they happened at the same time along the same sort of time period. So yeah, at the end of 2014, some containers of quinoa destined for the US were rejected at ports of entry because of testing positive for agrochemicals that they were not supposed to have on them. And this generated just a sort of tremendous crisis of suspicion within Peru's quinoa industry. The chemicals were effectively untraceable, and so it generated these different stories of blame. So, you know, one of the kind of dominant story of blame initially was, of course, this is the coastal farmers, right? You know, they're used to using lots of agrochemicals.

You know, doing agriculture in the Andean highlands is difficult for a lot of reasons. But one advantage is it's such a high altitude that there's not very many insects. And so there's fewer pests. And so there's a sort of obvious logic, right, to okay, you take quinoa out of that environment. You put it in the very humid, balmy coast and of course it's going to get, you know, attacked by lots of pests and you're going to need to spray it. But things got more complicated when people started trying to trace where the contaminated quinoa was coming from. And some of these shipments were coming from the Andean highlands. But that wasn't even a simple, you know, kind of story of, okay, therefore farmers in the Andes are using chemicals too. Some people suggested that. Other people said, no, what's going on is

that these producers along the coast now can't sell their quinoa because everyone has negative associations with quinoa from the coast. That instead those farmers are like driving shipments of coastal quinoa up to the highlands and selling it cheap so that then it could be resold as highland quinoa, which still had a more kind of pure connotation. So it created just, you know, all of these kind of conflicting stories of blame and generated, you know, a tremendous amount of distrust and suspicion that really harmed the industry.

Jeremy: With all the quinoa being grown in other countries, including some wealthy northern countries, how can the growers on the Altiplano, how can they distinguish themselves? There is a huge demand for kind of food with a story, food with history. Have they been working at that angle and selling the benefits of quinoa from the heartland of quinoa.

Emma: So in 2015, so this is right as, you know, it's becoming clear that quinoa's price is falling and it's not coming up anytime soon, I started following an effort to create an origin based label for quinoa produced within the contours of the Puno Region. They were pursuing a collective brand, which is sort of a weaker form of intellectual property, but at the time felt more doable to the actors that were involved in trying to create this. Because for a denomination of origin, which is, you know, what champagne has and many different products have, you would need a lot of resources, because you need to prove that your product is different. And so you need to have kind of, various sorts of experts, you know, chemists, whatever. Like you have to make some argument that it is, in a kind of rigorous way, different than quinoa produced outside the contours of the Puno Region of Peru. And so a collective brand is more about a kind of symbolic move to say that quinoa produced within this region, we are going to market it separately. We may not kind of prove at a material level its difference.

I had a lot of hope in this project because, you know, as a eater who is, you know, familiar with those kinds of products, I see that they ... that there's a lot of consumer interest in products with stories behind them that have, you know, connections to specific cultural context, to specific histories. And this seemed like a clear way to ensure going forward that, you know, the kinds of agricultural practices that are utilized in this region, the kind of deep history of

quinoa in this region, would translate into some kind of monetary benefits for those those people involved in the industry.

This became complicated and in the end did not work. So there there were various kind of complicating factors that made the kind of collective brand effort challenging. I think one of the important takeaways, though, is thinking about the funding of these projects. So the funding coming from, first, the government of Peru and then from a Swiss development org were really short term and kind of minimal amounts of funding. Like, here's a little bit to get things going, here's a little bit to pay someone to help you make a logo. This was just really insufficient for the kind of large infrastructural, or kind of institutional and infrastructural project that would be creating a kind of rigorous origin based label, especially in the context of this contamination crisis where there was all this suspicion about chemicals on quinoa, and, of course, the sense that, you know, if we're going to create this brand based around a superior quality quinoa, a quinoa of, you know, sort of purity and quote unquote authenticity, we need to make extra sure that our quinoa does not end up having any of these chemicals on it. I think that's an important takeaway, as there there are more and more international development orgs and international NGOs interested in this as a strategy for supporting diverse food systems, supporting traditional agricultural practices, that it ... the funding for origin based labels can't be a kind of one year thing. This has to be a kind of longer term project for it to be sustainable.

Jeremy: As an eater — I presume you're still eating quinoa in North America — do you care where your quinoa comes from?

Emma: Yeah. You know, people always ask me this, and I always hedge a bit. Yeah. I mean, I, I do have, you know, some kind of allegiance to Peruvian quinoa producers. And as much as the kind of organic certification system has its flaws, I do try to get quinoa produced at least in the Andes and certified organic. But I guess to me, like, the takeaways from the book have less to do with whether it's kind of a good thing or a bad thing to eat quinoa, and more with the kind of ways these larger kind of structural elements shape what happened with quinoa, and I'm hopeful that the message of this book also reaches sort of global food policymakers and folks at international NGOs and development orgs about how they can sort of make changes that are more policy level.

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