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Kelly Slater
among chia seed
fields in Western
Australia.

The need for seed

Chia seeds may be *TINY* but they pack a *SUPER* nutritional punch. Jody Scott explains the health benefits of *sprinkling* them liberally.

The last place you would expect to find surfing icon Kelly Slater looking so content is inland, many, many miles from the ocean.

But standing in a sea of chia seed fields near Kununurra in the remote Kimberley region of Western Australia, the 11-times surfing world champion is clearly enthralled to be at the source of one of his not-so-secret health weapons. The tiny super-seeds have been a daily staple in Slater's superfood-packed diet for many years.

Slater says he stumbled on the then obscure South American seed while cruising the aisles and reading packets in a health food store, something he admits he likes to do regularly. Surfing is his day job. But the pursuit of perfect health is his other passion and he spends many hours researching the latest theories online. It's the hobby that keeps him in peak condition.

We meet on more familiar turf at Snapper Rocks Surfriders Club, where the Quiksilver Pro Gold Contest, the first of 21 international events on the 2014 Samsung Galaxy ASP World Championship Tour, has just begun. Slater clearly loves talking health trends while keeping a keen eye on the heats unfolding

out front. But the more he warms up to his second favourite topic, the less he sneaks glances at the scoreboard.

Staying well while travelling and competing for 24 years on an almost perpetual world tour is no easy feat. Now 42, Slater has been the youngest and oldest surfer to win the ASP World Title (at 20

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and 39), but is still not talking about retirement. He clearly knows a thing or two about self-preservation and is a firm believer that food is medicine.

“By instinct and by nature you should eat strictly for survival and health,” he says. “If people did, everyone would be much more healthy, much more lean, much stronger,” he says. “When you have a well-oiled machine, you work a lot better, you don't need to sleep as much and you

have more energy. You probably have better thoughts, too.”

His Instagram account documents his adventures with homemade almond milk, acupuncture sessions, kombucha scobies, his daily vitamin haul, the contents of his “health pit” (a.k.a. fridge), smoothie recipes, superfood snacks and even his recipe for coconut banana bread muffins. Slater says his friends call him “snack boy”. “I literally travel with a little bag of healthy snacks everywhere I go,” he says. “Whether it's avocados or guacamole, health food bars or just some sort of powders you can put into water.”

But it was his post about chia seed puddings that caught the eye of The Chia Company team and led to his role as an ambassador for the company. Slater and his swimwear designer girlfriend Kalani Miller, of Mikoh swimwear, make their own chia seed puddings, soaking the seeds overnight in almond and coconut milk. “I travel with coconut oils and chia seeds,” he says. “I've done that for a long time. Even prior to working with The Chia Company.”

Chia is now anything but obscure. Downstairs in the surf club, a steady stream of surfer guys and girls grab free

samples of The Chia Company's newly launched Chia Pods to eat while watching the contest unfold. Online, chia seeds are often the star ingredient in a non-stop stream of recipe posts for puddings, pancakes, omelettes, truffles, muffins, smoothies, sprinkles and sugar-free jam. You can also use them as a thickening agent, egg replacement or salad sprinkle.

They may be flavourless but #chiaseeds is a hot topic for many reasons. Chia is said to aid digestion, lower cholesterol and help stabilise blood sugar levels. And chia's anti-inflammatory and hydrating benefits are the reason they are increasingly appearing as an ingredient in anti-ageing beauty products, too.

"As a dermatologist, I believe essential fatty acids are vitally important to beautiful skin," Dr Nicholas Perricone told the *Daily Mail* newspaper last year, explaining why he has added a chia serum to his anti-ageing range of beauty products. "Chia seeds are one of the richest vegetable sources of essential fatty acids and can keep the skin soft, supple and youthful.

"Cold-pressed, extra-virgin chia oil, especially when combined with fat-soluble vitamins and nutrients, rapidly transforms skin to give a vibrant, glowing and more healthy complexion."

Salvia hispanica (its Latin name) contains a little more omega-3 essential fatty acids than flaxseeds, but unlike flaxseeds you don't need to grind or prepare them first. According to US nutritionist Keri Glassman, no other plant-based food comes close to chia's level of omega-3, especially alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), which helps support brain health, improve mood and reduce inflammation.

Glassman says chia seeds are also 20 per cent protein, containing all nine amino acids, which makes them a complete protein (one tablespoon equals three grams). They also contain calcium (for bones and teeth), iron (for oxygen transport and energy), magnesium (heart health and teeth), potassium and phosphorous (kidney health), zinc (immunity), manganese (metabolism) and vitamins A, B12 and C.

Along with packing a serious nutritional punch, chia seeds are rich in fibre too (one tablespoon contains six grams). The seeds are made up of 20 per cent soluble fibre and 80 per cent insoluble fibre. "All that soluble fibre helps them build up and hold water," says Glassman. "That's the connection with hydration." Their soluble fibre (the

kind that dissolves in water) also helps balance blood sugar, manage cholesterol and increases that feeling of satiety. Meanwhile their insoluble fibre helps alleviate bloating and aids digestion.

"FRIENDS, COLLEAGUES AND ADVISORS SAID CHIA WOULD NOT COME TO ANYTHING"

In addition to all that, chia seeds are rich in antioxidants, with an ORAC (oxygen radical absorbance capacity) value higher than blueberries. Foods high in powerful antioxidants may help protect the body from free radicals and may reduce the risk of diseases such as certain cancers.

The Chia Company founder and CEO John Foss is a fourth-generation farmer who grew up on a grain farm in Western Australia. He discovered chia after he won a Nuffield Australia Farming Scholarship in 2001 and decided to study natural solutions to modern diet-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes and high cholesterol.

"I saw a little documentary on chia when I was studying in America," says Foss. "It showed a study on a group of Mexican people who ate chia every morning, and although they lived close to the American border and ate fast food, they had a lower incidence of diabetes and obesity. I asked myself two questions: 'Is this too good to be true?' And: 'If it is so good then why isn't everyone eating it already?'"

In his book *Born to Run*, author Christopher McDougall reveals that Mexico's legendary long-distance runners, the Tarahumara people, ate chia – which means "strength" in Mayan – for endurance before running hundreds of miles barefoot.

Aztec warriors apparently strapped pouches of the sacred seed to their waists before heading off to battle.

And chia fresca, which combines chia seeds, water and lemon or lime juice and a sweetener, has long been a favourite drink in Mexico and Central America.

But until Foss came along, chia was only being farmed in a small way in South America with a fragmented supply chain. Foss discovered that Western Australia's Kimberley region is perfectly positioned

for the latitude-specific crop, boasting good soil, plenty of sunshine and clean water from Lake Argyle. Eleven years later, The Chia Company has offices in New York, London and Melbourne and is the world's largest producer of chia, growing 100 per cent chemical-free, naturally grown seeds.

"Taking chia to Australia and founding The Chia Company was a leap of faith," says Foss, who is now based in the company's New York office. "Friends, colleagues and advisors said chia would not come to anything, that it was a nice thing to dabble in but you'd be crazy to leave an established industry." Even 12 months ago he says no-one would have invested in the business case for Chia Pods. "But in the first 100 days we did one million units." ■

CREAM OF THE CROP

The Chia Company
Chia Oil, \$25; www.thechiaco.com.au.



One Love Organics Chia Whip Foam Cleanser, \$30; www.ecodivabeauty.com.



Perricone MD Chia Serum, \$112; www.mecca.cosmetica.com.au.



The Beauty Chef Glow Inner Beauty Powder, \$60; www.thebeautychef.com.



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