

Eat Wisely Aperient Foods

The hot temperament of some foods, while often a primary factor in aphrodisiac properties, is by no means the only use in the theories of dieticians. Those who are disposed to phlegmatic or melancholic humors often suffer from conditions that are best relieved by dilating the passages of the body. To this end, it is sometimes useful to add various condiments or seasonings to foods to prevent ill effects from food which has a colder temperament, or to encourage the flow of mucous from the body's passage ways. Anyone suffering from nasal congestion is familiar with the use of hot spicy food to open up nasal passages, and even the famous "chicken soup" cure, also known as "Jewish penicillin" owes its effectiveness to this principle. This is one method of food theory whose application is still present in modern day medicine- chemical derivatives of some of these foods, in the form of menthol (from mint), anethol (from fennel, anise, and tarragon), and cynarin (from artichokes.) In its modern use, the term aperient refers more specifically to foods with a laxative effect.

In the use of these foods (or more properly, seasonings), the medieval physician would have been careful to make sure that persons with more choleric humors would avoid them, lest the body break into an excess purging of humors and fluids from inside. This would be marked by profuse sweating and itchy scabs. One might suffer irritability, "the vapors" which can be as mild as a mere headache, but in its more severe aspects can leave one with a sense of vertigo,

Since we have already discussed artichokes, fennel and anise, let's examine some of the other aperient foods that would have been recommended.

Although not technically a radish, is the horseradish, but closely related to them (they all belong to a family that includes turnips, cabbages and mustard) a potent and wondrous condiment. To unleash its potent and penetrating odor, one has to bruise or cut the root, which is otherwise innocent of scent. No one in antiquity seems to have taken much notice of horseradish, if it was used by the Greeks or Romans and boiled as were all other roots, its effect would have been bland and unremarkable.

Simeon Seth discusses the black radish, which is sometimes translated as horseradish, as being safe only for those with good digestion. However, those with problems with flatulence, or whose stomachs are already overloaded with food, avoid it entirely- as it will corrupt whatever food it thereafter consumed. He believes it to be bad for one's voice, and that it can provoke arthritic pains.

However, citing Dioscorides, he says that it is diuretic, and that the people of India claim that it sharpens all sensation and creates within one a "spirit of happiness and cleverness." This seems quite akin to the "chili high", an effect brought on by the

capsium in the chili pepper, whose burning seems to provoke in some people a surge of endorphins.

A decoction of this black radish was thought useful for easing jaundice and bladder problems, as well as being good for eyesight. But often, this liquid was used as an emetic to purge phlegm and to treat fever.

Hildegard von Bingen, almost alone among later dietary writers, has some things to say about horseradish. It should be eaten in March, when the root softens a bit, and it is good for strong, healthy people, and it is capable of giving vitality to one's inner humors. Once the root hardens, however, she believes it to be dangerous, and one should only suck whatever juice they find in it and spit out the pulp. Dried horseradish, ground into a powder with galingale is good, she thinks, for pains in the heart and the lungs.

Albertus Magnus in the 13th century describes the plant as being used for medicine alone, and not as a food. It is not until 1542 that a German writer mentions horseradish as a condiment. The English and Italians seem to have taken something of an interest in it at that point, English writers calling it "red cole", indicating that they found its heat as hot as a red coal. Our rendering of horseradish is based on a misspelling, it was originally "hoarseradish", the hoarse denoting a kind of coarse strength.

Grated or sliced horseradish is thinned with vinegar, which acts to temper the heat of the root, this was then served as a cold sauce for meat (particularly beef, which has cold properties) among the Germans, or fish (popular among Scandinavians), whereas the French often used the heat of the horseradish to temper cream sauces.

Mustard seed has been cultivated by humans for a very long time. It was known to the Egyptians, and found among prehistoric Greek sites. Galen, oddly, has little to say on it, save to advise using mustard to season bitter gourds, so that the heat gentles the gourds cooling effect.

Pliny is considerably more effusive on the subject, mentioning that no other substance penetrates further into the nostrils and brain, but then, he presumably knew nothing of horseradish. He proclaims it good for toothache and as a mouthwash mixed with honey and water. It is beneficial for all stomach troubles. It is an aid to expectoration for those with lung troubles (very problematic for phlegmatics), and is useful for both asthmatics and for reviving one after an epileptic seizure, and may dispel lethargy. The effect of sneezing after using mustard, he thinks will clear the mind, it also is a clear aperient, since it provokes urine, relaxes the bowels and promotes menstruation. If taken with vinegar, it helps dispel kidney stones.

Simeon Seth believes mustard useful on fluids that accumulate in the head and stomach, that it is useful against problems brought on by too much humidity (especially fevers) and that it is a remedy for gouty feet. It is helpful to digestion. It is not, however, good for one's vision, nor should it be consumed when one's liver is hot-although I am not sure of how one arrives at such a diagnosis.

Al-Warriq mentions the benefits of mustard in thinning down moisture in the body, and its action against phlegm. He also discusses the use of mustard and vinegar in salve

to reduce sciatic pain, and the use of mustard packs for a variety of pains has continued up until very recently. The recipe he gives for making mustard contains as much pounded walnut as seed. The vinegar is poured over this as one whips the mustard mixture, it will foam and the foam is skimmed off to be used as mustard. The remaining mixture is then used in a sauce with raisins and sugar. He also mentions that making the mustard with almond or olive oil and pomegranate juice will soften its pungency.

Hildegard von Bingen cautions one against eating mustard greens, as she believes this will destroy the interior organs of the body. She does not seem to favor the use of mustard as an aperient, on those with weak, cold stomachs. Unlike the Byzantine physicians, she thinks it somewhat good for making the eyes clear, but she finds it to induce headaches and overall, not good for the head. Nor does she find it good for the digestion, since it “produces something like smoke in the body.”

Platina, undeterred by this alarming prospect of interior smoke, advocates making mustard with almonds and bread crumbs. He finds it warming to the stomach and liver, effective in reducing the spleen, as well as creating thirst and inflaming one's passions. A less heating version is made with the addition of raisins, dates and cinnamon, which he assures us, will not “nourish badly.” Nevertheless, he thinks mustard a sovereign cure against poisonous things, such as snakebite and mushrooms, claims that even Pliny did not make for it.

As a spicing agent that did not have to be imported, but was easily grown locally and had been in use for such a long time, it would feature prominently in any larder worth taking note of. Indeed, the office of mustardarius, the official responsible for growing and preparing mustard for a court was not a bad position to have. As a commercial venture, the area around Dijon in France began in the mid 14th century.

While still conveying heat, although to a much lesser degree, is dill. This herb was known to the earliest Greeks. The Romans thought a great deal of it, believing it to have certain fortifying properties, and seasoned their gladiators meals with it. It would be a baleful existence, if one were a gladiator and didn't care for its taste or smell, and thus more or less ensured of a fairly nasty death, if you had to eat dill on a regular basis. This belief, however, was not shared by Pliny, who says it causes belching and relieve griping, as well as stopping diarrhea. Moreover, smelling the boiling seed of it relieves one of hiccoughs, drinking it in water will aid with indigestion.

Simeon Seth admits that the medicine of his day is of two minds on dill- some think it harmful to the stomach, others hold that it is beneficial. Many think it harmful to the kidneys. When cooked in oil, he notes that it eliminates flatulence and gives one restful sleep.

Even less enthusiastic on the subject is al-Warriq, who finds it bad for the stomach, inducing nausea. He says it increases lactation and is a diuretic.

Hildegard von Bingen doesn't do much in the way of dill promotion either. She says that no matter how it is eaten, dill makes one sad. However, if eaten cooked, it can help ease a number of ailments, from lumbago to arthritic pains. While much of our

discussion of late has centered on foods with an aphrodisiac property, dill is recommended by Hildegard to “extinguish the pleasure and lust of the flesh”, in a concoction made with water mint, tithymal and the root of Illyrian iris (both items I'd wager most of us are fresh out of., darn!)

The Romans introduced dill to Britain, and its use spread from there into Scandinavia. The Old Norse word *dilla* means “to lull”, and dill water was noted as being useful for getting babies to sleep, Its use was popular too throughout the rest of Northern Europe, the Poles using it as a seasoning for items as various as crayfish, leeks, and mushrooms.

Far more impressive is the reputation of the several varieties of mint. Of wild mint, Pliny says when if taken in water by women, it can bring on menstruation, indeed, it can act as an abortifacient. It is also useful, he thinks, against poison, and injuries due to scorpions and snakes. Remarkably, Pliny says that it is a safeguard against amorous dreams.

Of cultivated mints, the smell is such that it refreshes the mind, he goes so far as to recommend that students wear garlands of mint on their heads (recent studies suggest that there is something to this- mint and lavender both seem to have a positive effect on mental effort.) He notes that mint prevents curdling in milk, and notes that his contemporaries drink mint in their milk. It has the opposite effect of wild mint in that it checks menstruation and bleeding in both men and women. It is good for the voice and lung complaints.

Simeon Seth finds that mint is good for cooling the stomach and the liver, that it helps with digestion and calms vomiting. It is a remedy for flatulence, and like Pliny, he believes that it will kill intestinal worms, especially if paired up with wild mint in a decoction. He thinks it is an aphrodisiac, and is good for warming up cold kidneys, and helps clear out obstructions in the spleen and liver. It is good for the eyesight if taken before a meal. It is not good, he cautions, to use mint for a long time, as it weakens the blood.

The Arabic physicians say that mint is good for both the stomach and the chest. They note its ability to influence menstruation, and assert that it can kill a fetus through use as a suppository, not as a condiment. Like Pliny, they note that it has a beneficial effect on mental alertness.

Hildegard von Bingen agrees with mint as an aid to digestion, with the proviso that one not eat too much of it.

Salt too, has aperient qualities, but we shall leave that for another time. The effect of dill, which seems to be to open the upper portion of a “tight” stomach (the result of which would be a belch) is aperient, it is harder to guess how its mildly sedative properties might have been interpreted. Likewise, the use of mint in later period Britain was often to stimulate appetite, its use in sauce and jams were often seen as a way to cut through excess fat, an ability not purely aperient, but certainly helpful, as anyone who

has enjoyed an after-dinner mint can attest.

Maitre Gilles de Beauchamps

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