

Food for Thought: A Spice for What Ails You --- From Migraines to Morning Sickness, Ginger Is Reputed to Help

Templer, Robert

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

The emphasis in Asia has often been on the more expensive ingredients and the benefits they are said to offer. Shark's fin and bird's nest are tonics to perk up the tired and sick; bamboo webs, the fine filigree of membrane found inside bamboo stems, are said to lower blood pressure. But these perilously expensive and increasingly rare products are out of reach of most people. So the emphasis increasingly has been placed on the benefits of more prosaic ingredients such as ginger, the most widely used herbal remedy on earth.

Ginger's powers to induce sweating and reduce fever are also well known -- ginger tea has long been a popular cold remedy. There is some suggestion that ginger can limit the growth of cold-causing rhinoviruses. There is also some hope that it could be used as a painkiller -- as anyone who has ever eaten too much of it knows, ginger can numb the mouth. Indeed it is often this slight numbing effect that people who don't much care for ginger complain about when eating it.

FULL TEXT

Alongside cookbooks by celebrity chefs, the strongest trend in culinary writing in the past few years has been tomes by those tapping into age-old ideas about the health benefits of Asian cuisine. In the West, the lines between cuisine and medication are blurring, and people there are returning to an idea that has never been lost in most Asian cultures -- that what feeds you might also heal you.

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Ginger has been shown to have some healing properties that match its powerful taste. It can reduce morning sickness in pregnant women, although it needs to be used in moderation as large amounts are said to induce miscarriages. According to a study published in *The Lancet*, a British medical journal, ginger is better at preventing motion sickness than most over-the-counter medicines such as Dramamine. It has anti-inflammatory properties that help treat or prevent migraine headaches and rheumatoid arthritis. It can calm an upset stomach, ease diarrhea and is even said to inhibit production of cholesterol. These healing properties are believed to come from ginger's main active ingredient, gingerol, which makes up about 3% of this underground stem, or rhizome.

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Since Roman times, the health benefits of ginger have been well-known. Until the 17th century it was one of the most popular spices in Europe, where it was used mainly in its dried, ground form. It was purchased mostly from Arab spice merchants who tried to protect their sources by saying it was only grown in a mysterious paradise guarded by violent cave-dwellers. Demand in those days was enormous -- recipes in medieval French cookbooks call for ginger more often than pepper or cloves, the two spices that are said to have driven the quest for colonies. It's still widely used to hide the flavor of sea fish in Burma, where less pungent freshwater fish is often preferred.

Gradually, fewer meat or vegetable dishes were flavored with ginger, and it came to be used mostly for cakes and cookies.

Ginger's recent resurgence in the West has come on the back of the explosion in interest in Asian food and in the homeopathic remedies associated with this rhizome. Its uses range across most of the medical traditions in Asia -- from ayurvedic treatments in India to traditional Japanese kampo medicine. Kampo is a system derived from ancient Chinese thought but relying on a far-smaller range of products than those in the vast Chinese pharmacopeia. As kampo was often administered by Buddhist monks, most animal products were shunned and the drugs were almost entirely herbal.

In these systems, plants like ginger had a major medical role. In traditional Chinese medicine, ginger is said to "rescue devastated yang" when an infection has reached deep inside the body. It is mostly consumed for medicinal reasons in the form of tea, or the water from boiled ginger is applied to the skin to ease pain. Indian scientists have experimented with dried ginger, which they report can reduce the levels of fat in the blood. Thin slices of pickled ginger, turned pink by successive soakings in salt and then vinegar with red shiso leaves, are served with sushi as a digestive condiment, but ginger is also said to kill off any parasites or their eggs that are sometimes found in raw fish.

Although ginger appears to have a wide range of health benefits, many of which have been demonstrated in the laboratory, it is not clear how much benefit there is in eating it in the amounts found in most Asian cuisines. To get the full benefit, try freeze-dried ginger capsules, or drink a cup of ginger tea each day. For tea, most simmer half an ounce of peeled bruised root in a pint of water (about 15 grams of ginger to a half liter of water).

Send comments to awsj.food@awsj.com

Ginger Sources
To find out more about ginger and health, these books are available:
"A Spoonful of Ginger: Irresistible Health-Giving Recipes from Asian

Kitchens," by Nina Simonds. Knopf. This book is a collection of
recipes based on Chinese medicine but aimed at a general audience.
"Japanese Herbal Medicine: The Healing Art of Kampo," by Robert
Rister. Avery Publishing Group. This large compendium of information
about kampo offers a full guide to Japanese traditional herbal
medicine.
"The Wisdom of the Chinese Kitchen: Classic Family Recipes for
Celebration and Healing," by Grace Young. Simon & Schuster. A mixture
of biography, Chinese traditional healing and Cantonese recipes from
an Chinese-American author.
"Lord Krishna's Cuisine: The Art of Indian Vegetarian Cooking," by
Yamuna Devi. E P Dutton. A large compendium of Indian food based on
Vedic principles of health.
"The Healing Cuisine of China: 300 Recipes for Vibrant Health and
Longevity," by Zhuo Zhao. Healing Arts Press. A range of recipes from
the simple to complex "longevity banquets."

DETAILS

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