



Food as Medicine: *Bitter is Better*

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2,500 years ago, the father of modern medicine made the statement: “Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food.” Health conscious people today know that optimum health can only be achieved if we eat an abundance of fruits and vegetables. This is supported by the Canada Food Guide, which recommends 5-10 servings of fruits and vegetables daily. We like to believe that if we eat nutritious foods we will not need medicines or supplements.

Studies published in the past 15 years have shown that phytonutrients (nutrients from plants) are low in our supermarket produce as compared to wild plants. Unfortunately when we became farmers around 10,000 years ago, we stopped eating wild plants that were loaded with phytonutrients.



For example, wild dandelion leaves collected in the springtime have seven times more phytonutrients than spinach. And the purple potato from Peru has 28 times more cancer-fighting properties than the common white potato grown in Canada. A wild apple has 100 times more phytonutrients than the delectable Golden Delicious from the store!

According to anthropology studies, ancient peoples didn't live as long as we do; the minority lived to over 70 years. But the primary cause of death for most adults was infection or injury, rather than the degenerative diseases we see today (diabetes, cancer, heart disease). These people were hunter-gatherers who foraged for wild game and plants, exerting their bodies every day in this quest. They needed a lot of energy!

As people started gathering in communities and growing their own food, there was a “die off” effect as people adjusted to a diet higher in grain, which could be stored for later use. Grains are essentially the seeds of grasses, containing starch and nutrients, but also irritants like gluten and gliadin. Humans eventually adapted to this dietary change over time.

Over time, our agrarian ancestors cultivated the least bitter plants to grow for food. Choosing taste and texture, they selected to grow food plants that were high in sugar, starch and oil, and low in fiber. These high calorie, energy-dense, plants were not only a pleasure to eat compared to the rugged wild

plants of former peoples, but they provided a lot of instant energy. However, it is now known that plants that are bitter, sour or astringent in taste also contain the most phytonutrients. It seems that the better tasting our cultivated fruits and veggies became, the less benefit they had for our health.



Agriculture is an industry like any other in North America. It is profit driven, and that depends on consumer consumption. Much of scientific focus is on genetic modification: money and brainpower goes into developing disease-resistant fruits and vegetables. Most times, people buy fruits and vegetables that look and taste good, rather than ones that are high in phytonutrients. New varieties of produce are created every year by plant breeders who don't measure nutritional content of their produce; the concern is with how well the produce sells in the supermarket.

I quote: "Ultimately, we need more than an admonition to eat more fruits and vegetables: we need more fruits and vegetables to have higher nutrient quality". By reducing the nutrient quality of fruits and vegetables and increasing their sugar and starch content, how can we begin to correct this?

After you've become aware of the problem, there are some things you can do to help!

Look for colour! Produce that is blue, red, purple, orange, deep yellow - look for the most vibrant colours; they usually have the most nutrients. Here we find anthocyanins - great for restoring blood vessel walls, antioxidants... Buy produce locally and organic if possible; it's fresher and has higher nutrient content.



Look for green! The greener the better. Arugula, aka salad rocket, is very similar to its wild ancestor. And scallions, the entire plant, are more nutritious than the white bulbs. Greens are rich in cancer-fighting compounds called glucosinolates and antioxidants, which help neutralize the toxins encountered in everyday life. Greens are best served with an oil (olive oil is good), to enhance the absorption of nutrients. Greens should be a little bitter to be valuable to your liver and digestive system.

Herbs! These are wild plants in disguise! They have intense flavours and aromas, and their phytonutrient content has remained intact. Try adding one cup of mixed chopped parsley and basil to a pound of ground grass-fed beef or poultry. Herbs bring back missing phytonutrients and a touch of wild flavour also. Our ancestors used bitter, pungent and salty plants to add flavour and nutrition to our food, but also "good medicine".

Live on the wild side! If so inclined, buy a field guide to plants, and sample these wild delicacies on your walk in the field or forest. Consider dandelion leaves, nettles, wild leaks, and sheep sorrel. Be careful though, and absolutely sure of the plant identification!

Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food! Wise words of our ancestors. Explore new tastes and colours; enrich your life and health!