

## FRESHEN UP WITH CITRUS

Paul O'Brien



### *Western nutrition science enables us to break down the individual components of food.*

We can isolate and analyse the nutritional foundations of proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. We can determine calories and kilojoules, blood sugar insulin release levels, and intolerances. The ability of science to advance our understanding at a cellular level is nothing short of amazing. However, information extracted in laboratory experiments is abstracted.

Over 3,000 years old, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) did not have the advanced tools of the twenty-first century. It did, however, have one powerful tool – observation. TCM focuses on the reactions of the most complex and astounding piece of machinery ever invented – the human body. Information extracted in TCM is applied. The ulti-

mate indicator of foods properties is you.

Over the countless years and centuries, students of TCM have observed the effects that different foods have on the human body. Citrus contains the properties of Bitterness and Pungency – “Bitter to better your Lungs, Pungent to give you power”.\* In the West, citrus fruits have a reputation for relieving cold symptoms and boosting our immune system. In the East, they have long been used to treat a variety of conditions.

Citrus is connected to the function of the Lungs. Citrus peels, for example, resolve Stagnation. To understand the medicinal functions of citrus fruit, we must explore the

nature of the Lungs and the phenomenon of Stagnation.

*\*Note to readers: In TCM, both properties of medicines (e.g. Bitterness) and organs are capitalized (e.g. Lungs), so as to distinguish them from Western approaches.*

### **BILLOWS AND BOUNDARIES**

The lungs hold the air we inhale and allow the exchange of gases into and out of the bloodstream. However, in TCM, the Lungs are more than a modest part of the respiratory system. The movement of the gases we inhale, such as oxygen into the blood stream and the movement of carbon dioxide out of the lungs, is expressed poeti-

named after the elite Wei soldiers, who protected the Emperor.

The properties of our organs in Chinese medicine go beyond the physical layer. The Lungs are also responsible for our mental and emotional boundaries. Strong Lungs give rise to a strong sense of self, which gives us the strength of character to accept things that strengthen and nourish us while declining those that would influence us negatively and make us unhealthy.

Conversely, when the Lungs are physically weak, our sense of self is diminished. Our immune system will be compromised, and our vitality will be low. We breathe shallowly. Our skin is unhealthy. We'll be at constant risk of respiratory problems. Emotionally, sadness will be near-constant, and those affected will be introverted. There may be lack of self-esteem, harsh judgment of self and others, and failure to respect or understand boundaries. Dignity may turn to false pride, leaving a person feeling alone and disconnected.

In treating these symptoms, citrus performs a vital function in our physical and mental health. Citrus is imperative to a healthy vitamin profile, as well as to a vigorous immune system and balanced sense of self. It may be one of the best remedies for maintaining sanity and individuality in a world that encourages conventionality.

### **BLOCKS**

In traditional Chinese medicine, health is found in the natural flow of our energy. Illness and disease arise when a living organism becomes “stuck”.

This stagnation is a dysfunction of the mental-emotional barrier governed by the Lungs. Emotionally we may become irritated, frustrated, indecisive, or apathetic. These emotions are often accompanied with a sense of restriction or lack of freedom. Physi-

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cally in TCM, as movement along a border – a boundary between the inner and outer worlds.

Our basic energy is derived from the air we breathe. As such, the primary function of the lungs is to give energy and vitality, or what the Chinese call “Qi”.

Our skin is the “outer lung”: the pores of the skin open and close, acting as a barrier that protects us from the outside world. Beneath the skin runs the “Wei Qi”, the Chinese equivalent of the immune system and

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cally, stagnation typically presents as pain. For example, digestive disorders, menstrual problems, and headaches are common indicators.

We can have stagnant Qi and stagnant blood. Stagnant blood is more readily observable (ever had a bruise?). Blood stagnation results from obstruction: the blood cannot move freely, either due to external trauma or from internal blockage. Externally, blood stagnation often presents as sharp stabbing pain, similar to a bee sting. Internally, it most often presents as congealed masses, blood clots, cysts, and even cancerous tumours.

When our relationships, be they personal or work-related, constrain us, the pressure pushes on our mental barrier and restricts our sense of self and independence. This creates stagnant Qi because we cannot move freely emotionally or mentally.

We treat stagnation with movement. Citrus induces movement, both observable, as a physical reaction to the taste, and internally.

## THE FIVE FUN FLAVOURS

In traditional Chinese medicine, each of the major organs is associated with a particular element, collectively termed the 5 Element cycle. 5 Element theories inform the association between our internal health and food flavours. Each flavour describes an

inherent quality in our food and its relationship to a particular organ.

The 5 Principal Flavours are:

- Salty belongs to the Water Element, and nourishes the Kidney.
- Sour belongs to the Wood Element, and nourishes the Liver.
- Bitter belongs to the Fire Element, and nourishes the Heart.
- Sweet belongs to the Earth Element, and nourishes the Spleen.
- Pungent belongs to the Metal Element, and nourishes the Lung.

Citrus fruits belong to both the Bitter flavour group (think of lemons) and the Pungent flavour group (think of grapefruit). As such, they are closely associated with the Heart, Blood, Lungs, immune system, and general emotional health.

In *Spezzatino* Vol. 8, *Coffee*, I explored how Bitter nourishes the heart and balances the mind. Bitter is also used to drain and dry the body. It clears excess fluid retention (known in TCM as dampness), improves appetite, stimulates digestion, and enhances respiratory function. If you have a tendency toward asthma or breathing difficulties, adding bitter foods to your diet (in conjunction with your prescribed medication) may help alleviate your symptoms.

Pungent flavour disperses stagnation (mucus, phlegm, bruising), sends energy outwards and upwards (push-

ing away infection and strengthening the immune system), and increases blood circulation.

How does this actually work? Imagine eating a lemon. The bitterness of citrus contracts the body (think of your puckered face), squeezing the vessels and flushing the stagnant blood and energy. This creates movement (the involuntary retraction and shudders). The pungency of the citrus peel opens vessels (wide mouth) and clears mental-emotional health blockages (hence, your inevitable broad smile upon tasting).

Citrus has a long history of medicinal use. Lemon juice counteracts the effects of a bee sting (external stagnation). Oranges prevent scurvy (diminished Lungs). Citrus peels cleanse skin. The pips of citrus fruits destroy internal and external parasites. Here's one of my favourite citrus-based remedies.

These delicious, rich cookies always remind me of Christmas pudding, but I eat them year round, particularly after a hard workout, or when I've bruised following some hard sparring in my martial arts training. Dark in colour, they are naturally sweet but enlivened by the fresh tang of the citrus peel.

The molasses, spelt, and butter create moisture that nourishes the Blood and Qi (body's energy) and uplifts the

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## TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

Heart. The richness is balanced by the drying and moistening properties of the spices and the stagnation-moving properties of the citrus peel.

This is the ideal snack if you're feeling trapped or frustrated; have injured yourself and are sore or bruised; or if you feel you need a nice pick-me-up while boosting your immune system.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- 1 1/2 cup (375 mL) molasses*
- 3 tablespoons (45 mL) butter*
- 1 tablespoon (15 mL) baking powder*
- 3 cups (750 mL) spelt flour*
- 1/2 cup (125 mL) chopped almonds*
- 2 tablespoons (30 mL) fresh lemon peel*
- 2 tablespoons (30 mL) fresh orange peel*
- 1 tablespoon (15 mL) cinnamon*
- 1/2 teaspoon (2.5 mL) cloves*

### WHAT YOU'LL DO

Preheat the oven to 350 F (175 C).

Slowly heat the molasses in a pan with the butter, whisking to combine it. When the butter has melted and blended, take the mixture off the heat and add in the baking powder, along with about half the flour. Stir well.

Add in the rest of the ingredients one by one, mixing after each addition, saving the flour for last. When all remaining ingredients are blended, add in the other half of the flour. Keep stirring. The mixture will get stiff and sticky.

Press the mixture on to a greased baking tray so it is just less than half an inch thick. Bake for about 20-25 minutes. Pull the tray out and while still warm, cut the mix into about 2 dozen squares. Enjoy them warm and chew, or allow them to become cool and crispy.

