

The Wisdom of Food



In cooking, as in all arts, simplicity is
the sign of perfection.

CURNONSKY

This book is a practical guide to help you prepare delicious, healthy meals that nourish your body and soul. The principles of our program have their roots in both modern nutritional science and the world's most ancient health system, *Ayurveda*. *Ayurveda* is a Sanskrit word that can be translated as the “wisdom of life,” or “the science of longevity.” It offers a holistic approach to living that is based upon a fundamental principle: your choices are metabolized into your body.

Make healthy choices and you will have a healthy body. To the extent that you can choose, elect the option that is most likely to nourish you, and avoid choices that are toxic or depleting. One of the most direct choices you make on a daily

basis is what to put into your mouth. We encourage you to choose to eat healthy, delicious foods so you can create a healthy, vital body. Pay attention to these seven simple precepts and your diet will help you create greater mental and physical well-being.

1. Eat a wide variety of foods during the day.
2. Listen to your body's signals of hunger and satiety.
3. Use food to fill the emptiness in your stomach, not your heart.
4. If the meal isn't delicious, it isn't nourishing you.
5. Favor foods that are natural and vital.
6. Use herbs and spices liberally as both flavor and health enhancers.
7. Eat with awareness.

Let's explore each point in more detail.

1. *Eat a wide variety of foods during the day.* Most anthropologists date the origin of modern human beings to about 150,000 to 200,000 years ago. Up until about 10,000 years ago, we spent most of our days hunting and gathering food. During the course of a day, we sampled dozens if not hundreds of food sources. In addition to any animal protein we could snare, we ate a diverse range of roots, leaves, fruits, nuts, berries, beans, mushrooms, and seeds. Some primates in the wild today have been observed to nibble on more than two hundred different kinds of plants each day.

The average Western diet is much more limited in variety, and as a result we miss out on the extensive natural pharmacy that is available. Unfortunately, burgers, fries, and a diet Coke do not allow us to take advantage of the nourishing properties that a delicious, widely varied diet offers. Each day, nutritional scientists are discovering new health-promoting chemicals that are available to us through food. Think variety when it comes to your diet, and be sure to include the six tastes described later in this chapter.

2. *Listen to your body's signals of hunger and satiety.* Jonathan Swift once said, "My stomach serves me instead of a clock." Your appetite is your ally. Listen to it. You probably don't go to the gas station when your fuel tank is half full. Don't sit down at the meal table if your stomach is half full. Consider your appetite as a fuel gauge from 0 (completely empty) to 10 (stuffed). Do not eat until you are at a level 2 (very hungry) or 3 (definitely hungry). Eat until you reach a level 7 (satisfied). Do not go beyond this to a level 8 (rather full), 9 (uncomfortably full), or 10 (stuffed). Once you have reached your satisfaction level of 7, wait until you are back down to a level 2 or 3 before you eat again.

<i>Appetite</i>	10	stuffed
<i>Gauge</i>	9	uncomfortably full
Eat at level 2	8	rather full
or 3. Stop at	7	satisfied
level 7.	6	almost satisfied
	5	no hunger awareness
	4	could eat
	3	definitely hungry
	2	very hungry
	1	hunger pains
	0	completely empty

3. *Use food to fill the emptiness in your stomach, not your heart.* We learn to associate comfort with food at an early age. When you were upset as an infant, the chances are your mother offered you a bottle or her breast to calm you. As adults we sometimes seek food for its soothing, rather than nutritional, properties. If you do this on a regular basis, you are almost certainly not listening to your appetite. This often results in poor digestion, disturbed sleep, and weight gain. Use food to feed your body. Develop conscious communication skills to fill your heart.

4. *If the meal isn't delicious, it isn't nourishing you.* Enjoy your meals. Delicious food is nourishing to your body, mind, and

soul. If you are struggling with a diet that you believe is good for you, but do not find at all appetizing, it will not ultimately be nourishing and you will not be able to stay with it for long. In this book we will convince you that you do not have to sacrifice delicious meals for good health.

5. Favor foods that are natural and vital. According to most traditional health systems, food carries a vital force in addition to carbohydrates, proteins, fats, fiber, vitamins, and minerals. This life force is known as *prana* in Ayurveda and *chi* in Traditional Chinese medicine. Freshly picked green beans from your garden are abundant in prana; beans that have been sitting in your pantry for six months are lacking in prana. To the extent possible, favor fruits and vegetables that are locally grown, freshly harvested, and prepared as soon as possible after picking. Not only are they more delicious, but you are sending your body the message that it is receiving the highest quality health-promoting nutrients.

The longer that a food has been sitting on a shelf since its harvesting, the more likely it is to be affected by oxidation. Free radicals initiate the decomposition of a fruit or vegetable immediately after it is disconnected from its source. A sliced apple or banana that has been sitting around for an hour begins turning brown because free radical molecules floating in the air deplete it of its natural antioxidants. Rancid food is this process taken to the extreme. We therefore encourage you to favor fresh foods as much as possible and to the extent that is practical reduce your intake of frozen foods, leftovers, highly processed, microwaved, and canned foods.

Reduce	Favor
Frozen	Recently harvested, when possible
Leftover	Freshly prepared
Highly processed	All natural ingredients
Microwavable	Conventionally prepared
Canned	Fresh, when possible

As more information becomes available on the harmful effects of pesticides on our personal and environmental health, we encourage you to favor organic fruits, vegetables, and dairy products as much as you can. Reduce your consumption of processed and highly refined foods. Favor fresh as opposed to canned or frozen, recognizing that there are some foods, such as garbanzo beans, tomato sauce, diced tomatoes, salsas, and condiments that are just too difficult to regularly prepare fresh. Whenever you can, avoid leftovers or reheated foods. We are not encouraging you to become overly zealous about this point. Simply have the intention to eat foods that are as freshly prepared as possible.

6. *Use herbs and spices liberally as both flavor and health enhancers.* We encourage you to take advantage of nature's edible gifts to make your meals delicious and nutritious. Become familiar with the culinary and health-promoting effects of herbs and spices and use them generously. Even the simplest quickly prepared meal can be transformed into a culinary delight through the appropriate use of seasonings. We will share with you what we consider the essential ingredients to create the nutritional alchemy that will bring pleasure to your senses and well-being to your body.

7. *Eat with awareness.* A principle of Ayurveda is: How you eat is as important as what you eat. If you gobble down your meal while driving or watching television, it will not be as nourishing or life supporting as when you eat with awareness. Savor your food through all five senses. Try to minimize the chaos in your environment while you are eating. Even if you only have fifteen minutes for lunch, hold the phone calls and allow yourself to appreciate the miracle of food.

Occasionally eat a meal alone and notice the sounds, sensations, sights, tastes, and smells that are available to you. If you are following the previous principles, your meal will not only be sumptuous to the taste, but will also look and smell delicious. A healthy meal nourishes all the senses, and when you pay attention to all five senses, your food will be more nourishing.

The Six Tastes

A simple and practical approach to ensuring healthy nutritional variety is to pay attention to the tastes of your food. According to Ayurveda, everything edible can be classified according to one or more of six basic tastes: sweet, sour, salty, pungent, bitter, and astringent. If you sample foods that correspond to each of these tastes throughout the day, your meals will provide a wide assortment of health-promoting nutrients. Let's look at these six tastes one by one.

Sweet. Sweet is the taste of carbohydrates, proteins, and fats. Foods that carry the sweet taste increase your body bulk. Breads, grains, nuts, pasta, most fruits, starchy vegetables, dairy, oils, and all animal products are considered sweet. Sweet foods supply the majority of what we consume in a day.

In every category of taste, there are foods that are highly nutritious and others that should be eaten more sparingly. Favor fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, cereals, breads, and nuts. In addition to supplying your energy needs, they are good sources of fiber. If you are not ready to go vegetarian, reduce your intake of red meats, favoring cold-water fish and egg whites. Minimize your intake of highly refined sugar and wheat products. Favor low-fat dairy, polyunsaturated and monounsaturated oils while minimizing cholesterol-rich products and foods containing partially hydrogenated oils.

Sour. Any food that is mildly acidic is experienced as sour. Citric acid, lactic acid, ascorbic acid, and butyric acid are just a few of the acidic chemicals that contribute to the sour taste of foods. As with the sweet taste, there are sour foods that are more nutritious than others.

Favor oranges, grapefruits, strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, and tomatoes while reducing your intake of pickled foods, green olives, alcohol, and vinegar. Small helpings of low-fat yogurt and buttermilk can aid in digestion. Although aged sour cheeses can be delicious, use them judiciously, as they are usually high in cholesterol and difficult to digest.

Salty. Salt is the flavor of ion-producing minerals on the tongue. The principal salt of our diet is sodium chloride, which comes from mines or naturally salty bodies of water. The salty taste is also carried in soy sauce and many other sauces, seaweed, fish, and salted meats. In the right dose, salt adds flavor and stimulates digestion. Too much salt can contribute to high blood pressure and fluid retention.

Pungent. We often use the term “hot” to describe the pungent flavor. The spiciness of pepper, ginger, and other pungent sources comes from essential oils that interact with chemical receptors on the tongue. Most pungent foods contain natural antioxidants and infection-fighting chemicals. Due in part to their antispiling properties, pungent spices have been highly prized for millennia. A shortcut to the land of spices was a major incentive for the fifteenth-century journey of Columbus. Pungent flavors stimulate digestion and help mobilize stagnant secretions. Recent studies have suggested components of garlic and onions, also pungent foods, may help lower cholesterol levels and blood pressure.

Commonly available pungent foods include: chili peppers, cayenne, black pepper, fresh and dry ginger, horseradish, onions, garlic, leeks, mustard, cloves, cinnamon, peppermint, thyme, cumin, cardamom, basil, oregano, and rosemary. Adding spices and herbs to your life will serve both your palate and your health.

Bitter. Bitter is the taste of most green and yellow vegetables. Some green leafy vegetables such as endive and kale are particularly bitter. The bitterness is due to natural plant chemicals known as phytochemicals, which have detoxifying, disease-preventing, and healing properties that improve our chances for long, healthy lives. Broccoli and cauliflower, for example, are rich in the phytochemicals known as isothiocyanates, which have been shown to help fight cancer and heart disease. Asparagus, green peppers, and cabbage are rich in flavonoids, which help resist genetic injury, fight infections, and may even reduce your risk for memory loss. The bottom line: Eat your vegetables—they are good for you.

Astringent. The last of the six tastes is more of an effect than any actual flavor. Astringent foods have a drying, compacting, and puckering influence on your body. Beans, legumes, and peas are considered to fall within the astringent category, and provide excellent sources of vegetable protein, complex carbohydrates, and fiber to your diet. Several fruits are astringent, such as cranberries, pomegranates, persimmons, and tart apples. Green tea is also astringent and has been found to be a rich source of natural cancer-preventing chemicals. Astringent foods are an essential component of any diet that promotes renewal.

Weight Loss and Wellness

Many people struggling to shed unwanted pounds seek quick and effortless solutions, often bouncing from one weight loss diet to another. Unfortunately, quick fix diets seldom produce lasting benefits and may not be nutritionally balanced. At the Chopra Center for Well Being, we believe that attaining and maintaining an ideal weight is most easily achieved by following a consciousness-based approach. The principles outlined earlier, combined with a regular fitness program, will enable you to lose about one pound per week until you reach your optimal weight.

Honoring your appetite and eating with awareness will reawaken a healthy connection between your mind and body. When listened to, your body will tell you when it is hungry and when it is satisfied. Pay attention to the messages it is sending—it is trying to tell you what it needs to be healthy and fit. Ensure that all six tastes are available at every meal and you will satisfy the cravings that can sabotage your efforts to lose weight.

Please avoid crash diets. Although you may see quick results, study after study has demonstrated that the benefits cannot be sustained. Start a nutritional and lifestyle program today that will serve you throughout your entire life. Do not try to lose weight through diet alone. Exercise your body to enhance your

cardiovascular system and convert fat into muscle. You will feel better about your body and about yourself. We encourage you to shift your goal from achieving a specific number on your bathroom scale to attaining an optimal level of physical and emotional well-being. The Chopra Center 30-Day Nutritional Plan will support you in achieving this goal.

Wine and Well-Being: A Word on Alcohol

The fermentation of fruits and grains into alcoholic beverages dates to antiquity. Egyptian references to an intoxicating beverage derived from fruits stored in warm places can be identified over four thousand years ago. Around 1500 B.C., Middle Easterners created the first malt beverage from fermented grains. Wine, beer, and distilled alcoholic drinks have long played a role in cultures around the world, offering the potential for both pleasure and suffering. Although overindulgence in alcohol-containing beverages can contribute to emotional and physical distress, an occasional offering to Dionysus, the god of grapes and ecstasy, can be part of a healthy lifestyle.

Studies have shown that there are natural health-promoting chemicals in wine that may have a protective effect against heart disease and cancer. These natural disease-fighting substances, which have been shown to have potent antioxidant properties, go by such names as polyphenols, flavonoids, and resveratrol. These compounds are most concentrated in the skins of grapes. Because the production of red (but not white) wine involves prolonged contact of the juice with the grape skins, red wine has the highest concentration of these health-enhancing chemicals.

If you are so inclined, enjoy an occasional glass of wine as part of a delicious meal in the company of friends and loved ones. From a taste perspective, wine contains predominantly sour and astringent flavors, with traces of bitter and sweet; therefore,

it can complement and contribute to a balanced meal. This is not the case for distilled alcohol.

With over 40 percent of North Americans affected by a family member with alcoholism, it is important to remember that alcohol has potentially adverse effects on almost every system and cell in the body and can contribute to serious illnesses affecting the nervous system, liver, and digestive tract. It is also a source of essentially empty calories with each gram of alcohol contributing about 7 calories—almost as much as a gram of fat, which has 9. A pint of beer or eight ounces of wine carry about 200 calories, while an ounce of distilled liquor has about 80 calories; therefore, alcohol is not a useful component of a weight-loss program. Our bottom line is to consider an occasional glass of wine as another source of flavors and phytochemicals that can be part of a healthy nutritional program.