

GETTING FOOD IN ORDER: A GUIDE TO MEAL DESIGN

By Andrew Stermann

Food talk today can be complex and confusing: eat more of this, less of that; this is a superfood, that other is a must-avoid...or is it the other way around? Fads come and go, and studies can be found to justify almost anything. What is often overlooked is the importance of the way foods are combined into dishes and into meals. This is the open secret: it's not just the foods we include or exclude, it is the amounts and the way we combine them that may be the key to supporting good digestion and—by direct extension—nearly every aspect of our health.

In earlier times there was no order to meals, all the food was present on the table at once. Think of the European medieval banquet. Early recipe books and court paintings tell the story of huge tables laden with soups made with fruit and spices, porridges, roast meats, cheeses, meat pies, fruit pies, fish pies, pastries, breads and cheeses. Commoners, meanwhile, generally ate one-pot meals with anything available included. Things were similar in Asia, where savory and sweet dishes are still commonly served together. Dessert in Chinese restaurants is not well-developed by our Western standard. When I first began traveling to China, a meal was completed by a quick broth made from the bones of the fish that had been part of the meal. That tradition, so sensible, rooted in peasant ingenuity, using every bit of food for nourishment, sadly, has seemed to have fallen away with increased availability and the growth of affluence. Today, appetizers and desserts may be offered as a nod to Western custom, but meals in Asia tend to be more a celebration of bounty than an organized sequence of dishes.

The division of a meal into courses is not a contribution of East or West, but was introduced to Europe by an Arabic musician and master of lifestyle, Abu al-Hassan, also known as Ziryab (al-Hassan's nickname means blackbird, a reference to his singing skill, his unusually well-tended black hair or his dark skin). Ziryab left Baghdad in the early 9th century for Cordoba, Spain, the farthest point of the Arabic world. There he found patronage, built a school for performing arts and hosted highly sought-after dinner parties. A cultural star in his day, Ziryab was responsible for many innovations. Under his influence Andalusians learned to wear clothing of differing weight and colors for different seasons, washing and trimming hair often, scenting it with

aromatic oils, using deodorant and toothpaste, (all firsts in Europe). He even contributed to the evolution of the Arabic lute into the modern guitar. His fine dinners were served one course at a time, beginning with a soup, then dishes with meat or fish. Fruits and sweets were served only after the heavy dishes had been removed. Almonds were nibbled afterward, during conversation and performances. Arabic Andalusia fell to unified Spain 600 years later, but Ziryab's influence continued to spread, becoming inseparable from modern living.

The adoption of the sequential meal brought welcome clarity to an extended dinner, and cooks in many cultures have created healthy and delicious traditions. Sometimes, however, foods can clash and digestion can be bogged down, leading

to discomfort, weight gain and gradual degeneration of health. Too many pleasures tonight can result in great displeasure in both short and long term.

To understand the many contributions Chinese medicine has to offer here, it is necessary to understand a few concepts.

- First, it is important to differentiate between *basic eating* and *dietary therapy*. All of us could benefit from careful and specific uses of food, but most of us eat for enjoyment and reasonable health maintenance within a social, emotional or cultural context. This is basic eating. In contrast, therapeutic eating calls for a conscious selection of foods and methods within a well-formed strategy aiming at a specific goal, for example, to support fertility, reverse pre-diabetes, prevent hay-fever or migraines, rid bronchitis, support cancer recovery, etc. The focus here is on basic eating rather than therapeutic diets.

- Second, foods are classified into one of the three levels of qi: *wei* qi level, *ying* qi level and *yuan* qi level. While foods are understood in nutrition science through analysis of their material contents (offering some useful details), Chinese dietary medicine understands foods through keen observation of how a food interacts with our being. These assessments are made based on direct insight and experience, but also through classification based on a food's origin, its part of the plant (root, tuber, stem, leaf, flower, fruit, seed, nut, etc.), its animal's nature (sea or land, fast or slow, etc.) This classification process can become extremely refined and precise, but it is possible to work with it right away.



Ying Qi Level—*Ying* qi means nutritive qi, or the level of basic nourishment. *Ying* qi foods are basic to humanity: grains, beans (legumes), leafy vegetables, tubers and root vegetables, many nuts and seeds, and meat from land animals, poultry, fish, and many fermented foods. These foods resonate with the organs of digestion: stomach, spleen, pancreas, liver, gallbladder, small and large intestine. It is from this level of food and function that we derive principle nourishment for building bones, blood, muscles and hormones. This is the “middle” level of qi, but I’m presenting it here first because it is central for diet.

Yuan Qi Level—*Yuan* qi means original, source, or constitutional qi and refers to the deepest level of our health: our genetic health, our bones, marrow, gonadal and adrenal hormones, and the organs of kidney, bladder, reproductive system, and so forth. *Yuan* qi foods support this level and include shellfish, eggs, mushrooms, some seeds and nuts, sea vegetables, bone broths, etcetera.

Wei Qi Level—*Wei* qi means protective/defensive qi and refers to the body’s complex active response capacity. *Wei* qi protects us from germs and challenging experiences. *Wei* qi is the energy behind our overall alertness as well as a host of defensive functions from sweating and sneezing to localized healing responses to trauma such as inflammation and swelling. ‘*Wei*’ denotes ‘the outer’, but *wei* qi actually functions throughout the body. *Wei* qi relates particularly to the lungs but relies on many contributing factors for support. Foods that resonate most with *wei* qi are the products of plants and animals, such as nuts, dairy foods, fruits, honey, and, of course, chicken soup.

• Third, it is important to understand the concept of prenatal qi (the inherited spark of life that functions tenaciously as a kind of pilot light beneath all our functions) and postnatal qi (the day-to-day fuel we extract from eating and breathing to support growth, repair and all bodily functions). Prenatal qi, being inherited, is finite, but postnatal qi is created by effective digestion and assimilation of food. Simply eating something isn’t enough; postnatal qi is created as food is broken down, separated, nutrients absorbed, mixed with fresh breath in the lungs, then transported throughout the body to be metabolized. Digestive strength and integrity are even more important than the selection and quality of food. Prenatal and postnatal qi are important collective concepts because they are in a kind of mutual dance. Prenatal qi is like a limited amount of candle wax with a gentle flame burning; this flame is enough to light the ‘fire’ of digestion and support the warmth of *wei* qi. Postnatal qi is gathered from the world through eating and breathing supported by the inherent life-fire of prenatal qi. But, if we don’t eat or breathe well, if our food is consistently poor, if we eat while stressed or at wildly irregular times, if we derive energy from caffeine or sugar rather than food, or if we suppress our lung

qi with cold drinks while digesting, then postnatal qi will not be amply formed from our meals and our bodies will reach into prenatal qi for more and more support. In the well-known paraphrase of the American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, this is ‘burning the candle at both ends’; in the view of Chinese dietary medicine it is using constitutional reserves to finance what should be supported by the good digestion of an appropriate diet. Seen either way, it weakens us at the deepest level of our health and prevents us from living our fully allotted days. (It should be noted that if health and spirit are exceptionally well-balanced, some masters have taught that it is possible to replenish prenatal qi, but whether or not this is possible, the principal method is to protect prenatal qi by living life from postnatal qi.)

Constructing Healthy, Satisfying Meals

It is possible to understand constructing satisfying meals that are truly health-supportive with these (somewhat overlapping) concepts in mind.

For Basic Eating: Combine foods from one level of qi at a time. The foods for basic nourishment are largely in the *ying*/nutritive qi level: grains (rice, breads and noodles, millet, oats, etc.), greens (e.g., broccoli, kale, chard, green beans), squash, rhizomes and root vegetables (zucchini, squashes, edible pumpkins and their seeds, potato, sweet potato, carrot, parsnip, beets), beans, fish and meat (beef, lamb, chicken, most fish). For basic eating these foods can safely be combined together.

Foods from the *wei* qi level are best eaten as solo meals or alone as snacks: milk should be a solo food (if you choose to include dairy in your diet), and cheese is best as a snack where digestion can begin and finish its work before other foods are eaten. Fruit and nuts are best alone or combined together (still within one level, for example, almonds with raisins and coconut shavings).

Foods from the *yuan* qi level can also be eaten alone, for example, snacking on walnuts or chestnuts. *Yuan* qi level foods are also often combined with *ying* qi level foods for specific purposes in a therapeutic eating strategy, establishing mutual support between the *yuan* and *ying* qi levels.

For Therapeutic Eating: selectively combine *yuan* qi or *wei* qi level foods with *ying* qi foods to add directionality, internal communication and mutual support.

Portions

Portion size should be determined with clear intention in order to avoid confusing the body’s energetics. Focus on the *ying* qi level by making those foods the largest part of the meal (or dish) and make connections to *yuan* qi or *wei* qi levels by introducing small amounts of their representative foods (for example, a side dish of seaweed salad or fish crusted with sesame seeds or pine nuts). Use spices (*wei* qi

level) to fine tune the dish. It is the relative proportion in a dish which indicates to the body which foods are principal and which function in various supportive roles.

Tastes and Properties

The tastes (sweet, salty, bitter, pungent, sour and bland) add important functionality to dishes. The cooling or warming nature of various foods is also of central importance, as is the part of the plant (root, bulb, stalk, leaf, bud, flower, etc.) Integrating this point of view with the very familiar categorization of foods as either carbohydrates (grains, tubers, sugars), proteins (beans, animal food), and fats (oils, nuts, seeds, dairy) can create a rich palette for healthy eating that is creative, delicious and satisfying. Above all, meals designed within these guidelines will be easy to digest. When digestion is poor, consuming even good food leads to distress, weight problems and eventual ill-health.

Poor Digestion

Sometimes the way we have been eating no longer works for us; our digestion no longer keeps up with what we feed ourselves.

Signs of sluggish or weak digestion are:

- tiredness or sense of discomfort after eating
- hiccups, burping, flatulence
- bloating, discomfort, distention, pain
- difficulty concentrating ('foggy brain') after eating (often arising 1-2 hours after)
- constipation, possibly alternating with diarrhea
- puffiness including in the ankles, hips, belly, chest, throat or face

Appetizers

The appetizer's true role is to clear stagnation from poorly digested old food and prepare digestion for the current meal. Appetizers today are often only small portions of common dishes (in the style of the medieval free-for-all); too often this confuses digestion rather than awakening appetite. Ascertain whether starter dishes are well-chosen or merely additional desirable food.

Foods that work well as appetizers are those with a clearly descending directionality, either through being a root (e.g., carrots, beets) or having a mildly bitter taste (olives, artichokes). Fermented foods are also important appetizers because they aid digestion, particularly of the liver/gall bladder function (pickles, miso soup, olives and brined artichoke hearts). Small amounts of aperitif wine or a spoon of apple cider vinegar are also fermented and stimulate the stomach acid required for digesting protein and assimilating minerals needed for renewing bone strength.

Spices

Spices are not merely for enjoyment or cuisine purposes, spices and kitchen herbs strongly aid the digestion, if used strategically. Spices are a 'tool kit' to help digest the foods they accompany.

(See *An Introduction to the Energetics of Kitchen Herbs & Spices* in the Spring 2016 Golden Flower Newsletter—available on our website gfcherbs.com)

Side Dishes

Side dishes must not compete with main dishes or confuse digestion by creating poor combinations. Side dishes usually are made from *ying qi* level foods (green vegetables, potatoes, beets, etc.) or *yuan qi* level foods, such as mushrooms and sea vegetables.

Other Considerations

Good meal design must consider the time of day and your plans for that day.

• Breakfast should open our senses to start the day. It can be beneficial to us some grain (porridge-style or bread) to supply carbohydrates for fuel and glucoregulation, some protein (eggs, because they are easy to digest) to support *yuan qi* or simply for building and repairing the body. Orange juice is the essence of a fruit, and therefore easily overconsumed; a small amount is best to open the senses and stimulate the *wei qi* level. Milk (in cereal or coffee) also helps keep the *wei qi* level alert, however, it's easy to see that a common breakfast with milk, orange juice, grain product and protein includes all three *qi* levels and is therefore difficult to digest and energetically unclear. To optimize that type of breakfast, skillfully balance the portions: very small glass of juice (if any), no milk, principal portion of eggs with some toast and butter. Avoiding any refined sugar (in coffee, as jam, honey or maple syrup, etc.) will allow the body to extract fuel (blood sugar) from the food (rather than sweets), fostering alertness throughout the morning. Around the world, many breakfast options focus on a grain, a protein and some herbs, rather than beginning the day with sweets and caffeine, as is common for many busy Westerners.

• Lunch is the ideal time for protein, providing building materials for replenishment and repair while the day is still active.

• Dinner ideally is a quieter meal, a time for conversation. Have animal food and warming spices if preparing to go out, or focus on grain (rice or millet, etc.) and cooler protein (beans, tofu, fish) for a quiet evening (with, of course, plenty of green vegetables). The evening is a time to digest not only our dinners but thoughts and feelings from the day.

Dessert

Ideally, dessert, if planned, will complete something missing in the meal, a flavor, an energy. Or think of the innovations of Ziryab: sweets—fruit, preserved fruits, dairy, spices from flowers such as vanilla or saffron, belonging to the *wei qi* level—should be separated from the main eating, reserved for well after the meal, if desired. Can we digest any more? Will a bit of sweetness harmonize the meal or throw a wrench into the digestive works?

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If desired, add a dessert with spices to help digest and resolve heaviness: vanilla, cardamom, cinnamon, nutmeg, clove. Introduce a waiting period, a chance to assimilate what we've already consumed. Allow time for the meal to "land" and for us to feel sated; maybe we won't need dessert after a 20 minute patience period. Either way, observe how you feel, and if the pleasant humming-warmth in the belly that accompanies good digestion turns into a sense of being very, very full, you have sabotaged a clear meal. Note this for next time.

Summary

We eat to remain lively, to provide for growth and repair, and to provide fuel (well-regulated blood sugar). We eat to absorb what we need in order to move forward in our lives. We also eat to feel our cultural roots or to explore the culinary gifts of the world. We eat to create and share intimacy. All these reasons overlap in the collage we call 'eating'.

If problems do arise (and there are always challenges, small or large), it is essential to reduce or eliminate foods that create or exacerbate the problem, or that prevent the problem from resolving. Then, look to restore digestive strength and integrity:

- eat smaller meals
- include true appetizers
- use side dishes that contribute without confusing digestion
- include spices and kitchen herbs (the 'tool kit') skillfully
- combine foods within *ying* qi level for main eating; add yuán qi level foods for deep support, and eat wēi qi level foods as solo snacks, for basic eating
- wait before having second portions or dessert
- look honestly at your food habits; reduce or eliminate those that support problems. Eat for lively vitality.

These are very simple guidelines from the highly nuanced field of energetics. It is not necessary to know the details of each food; focusing on improving digestion is more than half the journey. As our two young children will tell you, a basic meal includes a grain, a green and a protein. Specific therapeutic meals can be exceptions. Understanding these principles provides a template for delicious eating made from simple ingredients that speak for themselves in a language our bodies innately understand.

Sample Menus

As you work with people focusing on their health and diets, the traditional teaching of Chinese dietary medicine is confirmed again and again: health is personal and diet must adjust individually and for the seasons, there is absolutely no general advice that fits everyone or every time. Yet, sharing meals is central to good living and it's not practical to cook differently for everyone day in and out. In our home we cook for whomever has the most pressing need, including any guest who may drop in for dinner nursing a cold or having had a particularly tough day.

But basically, a meal is a grain, a green and a protein. From there, adjust according to your knowledge of food energetics

and what you know of how everyone is doing. Here are a few sample meals for when basic eating is appropriate (or as a starting place to adjust for specific needs). Cooking, like life, is an improviser's game. Consider all recipes and meal plans as suggestions to be modified, *ad libitum*.

Meal 1

Appetizer: Sliced carrots with olive oil and pinch of sea salt. Steam lightly to add some yang qi to a cold food; leave just enough crunchiness to stimulate digestion via the stomach meridian which runs through the jaw. (Nibble the appetizer as you cook and converse.)

Grain: Steamed millet.

Green: Steamed kale, with olive oil and crushed sesame seeds sprinkled on top.

Protein: Lentils (any variety) cooked with cardamom, coriander seed, cumin, fresh ginger and turmeric, with butter, ghee, or grapeseed oil and pinch of salt when finished.

Meal 2

Appetizer: Cured olives and artichoke hearts in brine.

Grain: 2/3 white rice mixed with 1/3 buckwheat kasha (cook together). Brown rice has more nutrients but is markedly more difficult to digest. From a cuisine point of view, I prefer brown rice with vegetarian meals and white with heavier animal-food meals. Buckwheat adds a moving quality that helps avoid stagnation.

Green: Asparagus and zucchini, sliced and sautéed together.

Side dish: Crimini mushrooms cooked in butter, tamari, and a scrape of nutmeg.

Protein: Sliced skirt steak marinated in tamari, balsamic vinegar and sliced fresh ginger, cooked medium rare.

A Breakfast

First thing is Water: room temperature plain water first thing in the day, one or two glasses, a centerpiece of good health.

Grain: Corn polenta cooked with butter, served with a sprinkle of salt and just a touch of freshly cracked pepper.

Green: Parsley or cilantro.

Protein: Poached (or other method) eggs (or sautéed tofu for vegetarian option).

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