

Food Formulas: The Cook as Herbalist

By Andrew Sterman

There are many Chinese medicinal herbs that double as foods, and some famous herbs are used in the specialty tradition of herbal broth cooking. But to be fully integrated with a living Chinese medicine, there is nothing more powerful than organizing your daily foods as the herbs of your life. Rather than adding medicinals to dishes or using formulas after meals, the idea is that the formulas you rely upon can be used to create recipes and meals that fully enact their strategies. Foods are your agents, based on herbal principles and a thorough knowledge of the energetics of common foods.

As an example, let's use the strategies of *Bao He Wan* (Preserve Harmony Pill), the most famous formula of Zhu Dan-Xi (1281-1358), the last of the Four Great Masters from the particularly innovative period in Chinese Medicine, the Jin-Yuan Dynasty.

Bao He Wan (Preserve Harmony Pill) is a perfectly crafted formula—nothing duplicated and nothing left out. Each herb represents a strategy, and as the name suggests, they fit together harmoniously. It is very effective after a single eating indiscretion and also very helpful for long-term digestive damage. I often recommend it to patients when they travel.

A quick story. Recently, a patient said, “Andrew, in a couple weeks I'm going to Paris to meet my daughter who is studying there. Am I supposed to stay on this diet and miss out on all the beautiful pleasures my daughter and I could share together?” The answer depends on the status of the patient, of course. Many factors are involved, not least of which are the aspects of family bonding and the interesting way traveling often improves digestion. I recommended that she “Enjoy the cuisine offerings of Paris fully but wisely. Have cheese if you like, but not every day and not too much, it's the first few tastes that are the most enjoyable. Have wine if you like, but not too much, it's the first few sips that are the most enjoyable. Maintain your basic diet: vegetables, fish, some meat, grains like traditional bread, rice, and in Paris, don't miss the couscous. After any large meal that may not sit well, have some *Bao He Wan*.” She returned from a very memorable trip amazed at how well she felt throughout, then returned to her personally appropriate eating.

Bao He Wan is a seven (or eight) ingredient formula that is harmonious both in the way its herbs work together and in the harmony it restores after our dietary choices have thrown us a curve. This implies a very important question: What about not getting disharmonious in the first place? Aren't we supposed to know how to eat so that we don't need *Bao He Wan*?

Interestingly, the answer to such an obvious question isn't agreed upon easily. A quick survey of popular diets below shows both the imbalances they are perceived to correct and the imbalances they are likely to create.



LOW FAT DIETS

Low fat diets recommend reducing mostly saturated fats found in meat, chicken, eggs, and dairy. Dairy is encouraged only if artificially manipulated to be 'low' or 'no' fat.

Another way to think of low fat diets is that they benefit those who have not been digesting and clearing fats well. Simply put, if we are not 'handling' fats well, we do better when eating less of them, possibly drastically less. The formula *Bao He Wan* addresses this idea with the herb *lai fu zi* / raphani (radish seed). *Lai fu zi* brings the cutting quality of radish and the descending influence of seeds to cut through stagnation from poorly digested dietary fats.

LOW CARBOHYDRATE DIETS

Low carb diets recommend reducing carbs and grains. There is an interesting theory that humans evolved to eat game and gather root starches, meaning that the advent of grains 10,000 years ago began a period of physical decline made worse by the easy access to refined carbs and sugars today.

Another way to think of low carb diets is that they benefit those who have not been digesting carbs well. If we are not handling carbs well, eating less of them will help, but that is not equivalent to the idea that healthy individuals will benefit from eating little or no grain. *Bao He Wan* addresses poor digestion of carbohydrates with the herb *shen qu* / *masa fermentata* (wheat bran fermented with wormwood and other herbs). *Shen qu* strongly helps resolve food stagnation relating to overconsumption of carbohydrates: pasta, bread, baked goods, sweets, and alcohol. (Problems with grains in modern societies are mostly due to overeating sugar, and do not arise from millet, brown rice, or antique wheats.)

HIGH PROTEIN DIETS

The low-carb diet is often a **High Protein Diet**, with very high amounts of meat, fish, egg and other protein. Saturated fats are restored to the game as sugar and grains are moved to the penalty box. Naturally, eating that much animal food boosts yang qi enough that most people feel invigorated and livelier. Eventually, however, the stimulation will be taxing. That much meat can be difficult to digest, leading to stagnation from meats and their fats. *Bao He Wan* addresses this problem with the herb *shan zha*/crataegus (hawthorn berry). *Shan zha* is a potential superstar herb waiting for its shelf space next to *goji* berries in mainstream markets.

Bao He Wan addresses stagnation resulting from poorly digesting all three categories of macronutrients: proteins, carbohydrates and fats. Functions overlap, but to simplify:

- *Shan zha*/crataegus (hawthorn berry) relieves stagnation from proteins (meats, especially fatty meats and dairy).
- *Shen qu*/massa fermentata (wheat bran fermented with wormwood and other herbs) relieves stagnation from carbs, sugars and alcohol.
- *Lai fu zi*/raphani (radish seed) clears stagnation from fats (again including dairy, cheese, nuts, and also helps with carbohydrates).

It's interesting to notice that most diets recommended today are effective at first because they address an imbalance, but after an initial improvement the diet will cause new imbalances and stagnation will arise from a new excess. *Bao He Wan* says that we should seek to restore harmony rather than bounce from one extreme to another. Since Zhu Dan-Xi doesn't know which macronutrient we are having problems with, he addresses all three. If you know your health and habits, you can leave out what's not needed, but Master Zhu is more interested in giving a complete teaching on digestion than creating a series of formulas for various dietary pitfalls.

Bao He Wan includes four additional therapeutic principles, each represented by a single herb.

Chen pi/mature citrus peel relaxes the diaphragm, allowing breathing to be more full and natural. *Chen pi* helps the organs get along (regulates qi), helps with dampness and aids in handling any phlegm that may arise from poor digestion. (It transforms phlegm).

Zhi ban xia/prepared pinellia is a powerful herb that primarily helps to restore the descent of stomach qi. *Ban xia* treats nausea, hiccups, reflux. It is often used to clear phlegm, but its role in *Bao He Wan* follows its more classical use: to correct rebellious qi and restore the descending action of lung and stomach, effectively harmonizing the stomach with spleen-pancreas. Pinellia is treated with ginger, making ginger an

important agent in *Bao He Wan* despite not being named in the formula.

Fu ling/poria or hoelen is a mushroom that grows like truffles between the roots of large oak (or cinnamon) trees. Unlike the aromatic truffle, *fu ling* is extremely mild; this bland taste has a diuretic influence, making it an important herb for clearing turbid fluids, dampness, and phlegm. *Fu ling* amplifies the effects of *ban xia* for resolving nausea, distention, and problems from phlegm.

Surprising, perhaps, is the inclusion of *lian qiao*/forsythia fruit, an herb that clears heat and toxins. What Zhu Dan-Xi is saying is that, to use modern jargon, meals that don't digest well cause stagnation which in turn causes inflammation. It is prudent to clear inflammation before it takes hold, or treat if it has. Stagnation is like a traffic jam—heat arises when natural flux is held up. It's the body's natural attempt to raise enough energy to move what is stuck. What gets stuck? We've already identified that—any of the macronutrients can lead to stagnation: meats, carbs or fats.

Although not in the original formula, *Bao He Wan* usually includes *mai ya*/sprouted barley. Barley was the first domesticated grain, and there is poetic satisfaction in knowing that when sprouted, barley becomes a potent herb to treat potential problems from all grains. Mai ya reduces stagnation from any grain or carb source. (Barley malt is a sugar substitute—maltose—made from sprouted barley, which can also clear food stagnation. As with any sugar, however, too much is not good).

Having looked at each herb's role in *Bao He Wan*, we can now ask these three questions with informed clarity:

- Can a meal be made that restores harmony?
- Can *Bao He Wan* be a practical blueprint for such meals?
- Can these meals be enjoyable enough that no one would have to know?

To fulfill this challenge let's review the strategy:

1. Assist digestion of all three major components of meals: carbs, proteins, and oils.
2. Relax the middle.
3. Insure descent of stomach qi.
4. Transform or expel dampness or phlegm.
5. Clear heat (inflammation) that may arise.

What we need to know next is what foods help fulfill these roles.

TO IMPROVE DIGESTION OVERALL:

- Eat smaller portions, return for more if truly desired.

- Separate desserts from meals with a pause (desserts should be on occasion, not daily).
- If needed, separate proteins (meats and fish) from carbs (grains).
- Reduce or eliminate dairy, sugar and, if needed, gluten.
- Eat with others whose company you enjoy.

Now let's be more specific.

TO ASSIST CARB DIGESTION:

Use sprouts, fermented foods and seed spices.

Mai ya/sprouted barley is sprouted; including any sprouts or young green vegetables aids carb digestion.

Shen qu/massa fermentata is fermented; adding fermented foods aids digestion.

Bao He Wan doesn't include spices per se, but spices and kitchen herbs strongly add directionality which in turn helps to clear stagnation. For carbs, seed spices are especially helpful. Add seed spices to steamed rice, have them baked into bread, or provide them in a small dish after meals: fennel seed, anise seed, cumin seed, caraway seed, mustard seed, and others.

The addition of sprouts, fermented products, and seed spices will dramatically transform digestion, particularly of carbohydrates. Sprouts can be added to grains, or grains can be soaked before cooking, essentially sprouting the grain (or at least germinating) it.

TO ASSIST PROTEIN DIGESTION:

Add pit fruits or unripe (sour) fruits. Cooking lamb or duck (fatty meats) with dried fruits (apricot, figs, prunes) is a traditional way to aid their digestion. Today, most sweet and sour sauce is artificial and cloying, but the principle still works—add dried fruit for the sweet taste and vinegar for the sour. (Most people don't cook with sour fruits like unripe plums these days).

Citrus peel is in *Bao He Wan*; use citrus zest in your cooking, not just for baked goods but for meat dishes. Citrus peel helps relax the diaphragm so breath can descend, necessary for stoking the furnace of good digestion. Learn to make marmalade with *chen pi*, it's easy and wonderfully useful as a digestive aid.

TO ASSIST FAT DIGESTION:

Citrus peel helps cut through fats too, but something like radish will do even more. My paternal grandfather was born near Kiev; one of his favorite things to eat was a thick slice of rye (with caraway seeds), a slice of hard cheese, coarse-ground mustard, a slice of red onion and a thick slice of black radish. Onion and black radish help cheese digestion. Mus-

tard and caraway are both seed spices, mustard also includes vinegar (fermented). Together, the spices and radish prevented stagnation that would otherwise be expected from heavy cheese with bread. Use spices of all types to cut through fats (including dairy or fried food): radish, onion, ginger, rosemary, oregano, tarragon, mustard, caraway, fennel seed, cumin seed, etc. Remember, ginger is an essential agent in *zhi ban xia*, included in *Bao He Wan*.

RELAXING THE MIDDLE

The next principle is to relax the middle. We've already mentioned that citrus peel relaxes the diaphragm. If food stagnation is present in the morning, marmalade with breakfast can help (not too much—sugar is present in the jam-making process). Root vegetables also relax the middle: carrots, sweet potatoes, beets, etc., as do nuts and seeds due to their descending nature. (Use radish or citrus peel to cut through oil stagnation if you overeat nuts).

DESCENDING THE STOMACH QI

Ban xia represents the next strategy in *Bao He Wan*: insure the descent of stomach qi. In the kitchen, a genuine appetizer has that role, to clear stagnation and open the stomach in order to receive the meal. True appetizers are crunchy, slightly bitter or descending. Olives, artichokes, celery, and carrots are good choices. A real appetizer doesn't soften hunger, rather, it prepares for good digestion of what's to come. Having *ban xia* in the formula means stomach qi must not be descending; we must have eaten when our digestion wasn't prepared for food. Use appetizers wisely.

CLEARING DAMPNES

Fu ling represents the next strategy in the formula: **to clear dampness**. Dampness develops like an internal 'swampiness'. Relieving dampness is like lifting a wet blanket off an athlete; everything is better. Citrus peel, radishes, spices, and skillful appetizers will already prevent, reduce, and begin clearing dampness. *Fu ling* also tells us not to ignore mushrooms. Mushrooms fortify the *jing* level, and since they thrive in damp conditions in nature, they help to clear damp conditions within. In the kitchen we don't typically include medicinal mushrooms (e.g., *ling zhi*/*reishi*/ganoderma or *fu ling*) nor do we eat hallucinatory mushrooms, yet all mushrooms share a hint of these properties. Use mushrooms to clear dampness, strengthen life's foundations, and clarify what is important.

CLEARING HEAT (INFLAMMATION)

Inflammation is a buzzword today. *Lian qiao*/forsythia fruit is known for clearing heat in the upper body, cooling the blood, disinhibiting urination (to vent heat and toxins through the lower center), and dissipating stagnation and internal clumping. In the kitchen we don't use such strong herbs, but citrus

4 FOOD FORMULAS: THE COOK AS HERBALIST

peel and mushrooms have already started clearing, cooling and disinhibiting. Flowers are *wei qi*/protective qi agents, so think of kitchen herbs that open to the exterior with a cooling effect, for example, parsley and thyme. Even warming herbs such as cilantro and dill will clear inflammation as the pores open and heat vents. Other diuretics can be very important here as well: snow peas, green beans, or barley. Lentils are excellent for clearing toxicity, as are sprouts (dietary sprouts such as mung bean sprouts are very cooling, clear toxin and disinhibit, in this case more strongly than the herbal sprout *mai ya*). And the easiest and most obvious way to clear inflammation (and therefore the most overlooked) is to eat dramatically more leafy green vegetables: kale, collard, chard, broccoli, string beans, cabbage, bok choy, and so forth. Consume dramatically more vegetables, cooked in order to protect the stomach, spleen and intestines from too much cold. We want the cooling effect for the liver and the blood, not in the digestion.

On occasion, imagine inviting Zhu Dan-Xi to dinner along with your family and friends. Share a meal that digests well without seeming to be 'health food,' then relax with tea for an hour or so, with no stagnation arising anywhere in your system. Zhu Dan-Xi may not recognize all the foods we eat in our modern home, but he would certainly recognize his teachings on our table.

ANDREW STERMAN teaches food energetics and sees clients for private dietary therapy and qigong practice in New York City. He has studied broadly in holistic cooking, and since 2001 has been a student of Daoist Master Jeffrey Yuen in herbal medicine, qigong, tai chi, meditation, and of course, dietary therapy from the classical Chinese Medicine tradition. Andrew is currently completing a multi-volume book on food energetics and previews material on his blog, **[andrewsterman.com/#!/blog/c5kf](#)** or at **[facebook.com/UnderstandingFood](#)**.