

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ENERGETICS OF KITCHEN HERBS & SPICES

By Andrew Serman

Spices are a very special part of the diet, and understanding their energetics is important for enjoyable and healthful eating. Because they are used in such small amounts, spices and kitchen herbs are very useful in studying the energetics of food. It is not their nutritional content or their use as traditional preservatives as much as the potent responses they elicit within us that make kitchen herbs and spices so useful. Because they are powerful in small amounts, they are also frequently misunderstood and misused.

Seen on a continuum, kitchen herbs and spices lie somewhere between foods and medicinal herbs, often overlapping into both categories. Used wisely, spices and kitchen herbs help us to digest meals, get back on track from common ailments, and open our senses. Used incorrectly, they easily become habitual dietary indiscretions, interfering with our attempts to move forward. Spices, as a very dynamic part of diet, either help or hinder our efforts at healing, including cultivation practices, herbal or acupuncture strategies, and Western drugs or procedures.

Further, spices have been moving forces in world history, central to the meeting of civilizations and the discovery of continents. All over the world, kitchen herbs and spices have been used for cuisine, food preservation, and as medicines. They were expensive, rare, and highly prized. Today, spices are cheap and readily available, and through a kind of inflation of taste, spices are often over-emphasized in cuisine, leading to problems of overuse.

A cook is always thinking about what makes a meal work well. The macro and micronutrients necessary for complete nutrition are provided through grains, vegetables, fruits and protein foods (beans, nuts, seeds, dairy, fish or meats). Spices and herbs support three other distinct functions: they stimulate appetite, aid digestion, and provide directionality. Further, like medicinal herbs, spices can be used to support specific organ energetics.

When cooking for someone elderly or weakened by stress or illness, it is essential to tend appetite and support digestion. If very weak, food should be bland and long-cooked to increase digestibility, but as recovery progresses, very soon the diet needs to bring more nourishment, sometimes leading the recovery with gentle challenges to raise appetite and strengthen digestion. Salt and the use of personal comfort foods can be important to make food appealing, but also very important are the gently warming spices, such as rosemary, oregano, marjoram, fresh ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, or clove. Warming spices and kitchen

herbs are also very important for long-time vegetarians whose digestive tracts can tend to cool down (meat requires—and therefore calls up—more stomach fire). From this perspective, it's easy to see that the energetics of food are equally or more important than the material substances they contain.

Many traditional dishes are built around a deep understanding of how spices and kitchen herbs help to digest the food they accompany. Seeds like caraway or poppy help digest carbohydrates; they are often baked into breads, especially heavy breads such as rye or bagels. Cumin helps digest meats and beans; it is standard in meat stews from Morocco and chili from Texas. Oregano aids digestion of carbs and fats and is standard on pizza. There are countless examples of traditional dietary wisdom in classic dishes.



For this reason, spices and kitchen herbs are usually classified by cooks according to the cuisines where they are prominent or foods they traditionally accompany: rosemary with lamb or cinnamon in apple pie. This is useful for cooking clarity and for both traditional continuity and cuisine fusions. Without dismissing this cuisine-only viewpoint, understanding the energetics of spices as assessed in Chinese medicine can add tremendous depth to our spice use,

including many new possibilities for creative cooking. Chinese medicine dietary tradition treats spices and kitchen herbs with the same methodical systematizing it uses for medicinal herbs: assessing by taste, qi (thermostatic influence), law of signature based on part of plant, directionality, humor effected, *zang-fu* and channel affinity or influence.

Beyond aiding digestion, spices and kitchen herbs provide directionality (vegetables are also important for directionality in the diet). While meats, grains and tubers mostly support the center, nearly all spices and kitchen herbs stimulate movement from the center to the exterior. It's easy to see how spices can help a heavy diet be more balanced, but overuse of spices—especially hot spices (garlic, onions, hot peppers)—can be a cause of dehydration (moving fluids too much from the center and drying the body in the process) or irritability and sleeping difficulties (unsettling the *shen*).

All spices move qi and fluids, but differentiation is important. Some are strongly ascending (e.g., rosemary or garlic), some focus more internally (e.g., ginger, turmeric), while some are descending. (As expected, these would be relatively rarer, mostly seed spices). This is very important to consider. The use of rosemary, for example, is excellent in the morning to uplift

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qi—perhaps with a pinch of tarragon on eggs with three spears of asparagus—but inappropriate in the evening if aiming for a restful sleep. Similarly, if trying to use garlic to cleanse digestion, it is necessary to counteract its strong ascending quality with a dietary envoy—as in herbal medicine practice—such as carrots and sesame seeds. Using this knowledge, it's easy to create a therapeutic side dish. Add other descending ingredients if you like, such as mushrooms, a seaweed or even walnuts, included at each meal for several days for a moderate cleanse.

Along with directionality, it is important to consider the qi or thermostatic quality of herbs and spices. At first, categorize herbs and spices broadly. Warming spices are the safest and most common, including most of the dried leafy herbs, seed spices and rhizomes such as ginger and turmeric. Cooling kitchen herbs are important because they are relatively less common, but do include mint, parsley, cilantro, and thyme. The hot spices are extremely popular today but are the ones that should be used with the most caution, including not only hot peppers, but also onions and garlic (sometimes also clove). Hot spices are best considered to be medicinal herbs for short term use (acute conditions). They strongly stimulate exocrine fluids (tearing as you slice them, salivating as you taste them and stimulating internal fluid secretion after you have eaten them). Moving internal fluids as they do, they can be useful for immune function (*wei qi*) if sufficient fluid is available. People with complaints of reflux or urgent hunger (excess stomach fire), signs of dehydration on their tongue or blood/fluid/hormonal deficiency in their pulses should avoid hot spices.

Although all spices are classified with the same taste in Chinese medicine source books (the term is *xin/spicy*), in my training that term is usefully differentiated into three types of spicy taste.

- **Spicy** refers mostly to the basic kitchen herbs (e.g., oregano, rosemary, basil), and classic spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg, cumin, coriander seed, etc. These spices can be thought of as stimulating qi; most are warming.

- **Acrid** refers to leafy herbs that are minty or tingling (including mint, shiso, cilantro, lemongrass, etc.). These herbs are often cooling.

- **Pungent** refers to the sharper spices, including bulbs (scallions, onions, garlic), some roots (ginger, turmeric) and the hot peppers (capsicum type, black pepper and Szechuan pepper). The pungent spices are usually warming or hot and go to the blood level.

Salty is also a taste category in Chinese medicine, including not only salt itself (of various types) but also spices or vegetables that leave a mineral-like sensation on the tongue. In the context of kitchen use, salt can be thought of as representing minerals (one third of the *Shen Nong Ben Cao* is devoted to mineral use) and can be seen as cooling (minerals are generally cooling). The well-known property of salt to retain water can be used skillfully as in herbal medicine to provide hydration to soften hardnesses that resist clearing.

Furthermore, the part of the plant a spice comes from is a very early and important criterion for assessing function, either through the law of signature or when careful assessment shows a deviation from what may be expected. Seeds, for example, are the expression of the *jing* of a plant, and as seeds, usually have a descending directionality (seeds fall). Many seeds—such as sesame seeds—indeed have most of their influence in the lower abdomen, but others have a floating quality (e.g., poppy seeds). In any case, there are common spices from all the parts of plants, providing another method for classifying the kitchen herbs and spices.

Each spice can be known much more thoroughly, revealing properties and uses that can't be included in a simplified chart, but seeing things simply is important. In order not to feel overwhelmed by detail, begin by noting qi/thermostatic effect, pairing cooling herbs with warming foods, such as thyme and tarragon with chicken or eggs, or vice versa, pairing warming cinnamon, clove and nutmeg with cooling fruits. Rely on leafy herbs or seed spices to aid digestion and relieve any sense of bloating or stagnation. Differentiating which are the very best kitchen herbs in the moment is less important than beginning to explore them energetically and improving the enjoyment of food. There may be days when an emotional focus is foremost, for example, serving a hearty meal with rosemary and mustard seed to invigorate conversation at a dinner party, using cumin and saffron to encourage sharing of feelings in a smaller setting, or yogurt with vanilla and a splash of rosewater to calm the spirit after a period of high pressure or being too busy.

In today's dining culture, strong spices are often greatly overused. Too often, 'spicy' only means hot, and dishes stress our systems instead of making skillful use of the wide spectrum of spices (and their functions) available to us today. Even whole cultures are moving toward more extremes of spicy heat. Gradually, individuals will adapt to spice escalation, but the proof is in pulse and tongue diagnosis. For example, on a recent trip to South Korea, I was stunned by the constant use of raw garlic and meals covered in red spices—how much this is a fairly recent escalation was clear during a meal at an old-fashioned restaurant that served the same set-meal since it opened in 1970; this was country food that had well-balanced tastes with a few different hints of heat. Further confusion can arise as common Western health advice to reduce salt intake features recipes relying on overuse of kitchen herbs and spices to add flavor, resulting in dishes that are woefully unbalanced and ultimately do not support health.

Spices and kitchen herbs are potent players in the kitchen, often closer to medicinal herbs than to the grains, meats, fishes, fruits and vegetables that they enhance. It's here that we can fine tune the energetics of the meals we offer, using insights from the masters of Chinese medicine along with our awareness of our current needs, cultural backgrounds, and evolving skills.

Part of Plant	Example Herbs & Spices	Type of Spicy (Xin)	Thermostatic (Qi)	Select Properties	Common Food Functions
Rhizomes/ Roots	Ginger, Turmeric, Horseradish	Pungent	Warming (wasabi is hot)	Diffusing and harmonizing, Hotter ones stimulate fluids and clear sensory portals	Warm digestion, help resolve phlegm and abdominal discomfort
Bulbs (often with stems)	Chives, Scallions, Onions, Garlic	Pungent	Warming (onions and garlic are hot)	Invigorate digestion and circulation	The sharper onions and garlic strongly move fluids, are easily overused
Bark	Cinnamon	Spicy	Warming	Ascends, invigorates, helps stiffness, and certain headaches	Useful with fruits (warms their coolness), desserts (aids their digestion) and savory dishes (common in Indian, North African and Mexican cuisines)
Leaves	Basil, Oregano, Rosemary, Tarragon  Cilantro, Dill, Marjoram, Mint, Parsley, Thyme	Spicy	Warming  Cooling	Specific properties vary, but generally help move stagnation, aid digestion, and diffuse qi	Differentiate warming and cooling to balance foods, temperaments and specific needs of the day
Buds	Capers, Cloves	Spicy (capers in brine are Salty)	Cloves are warming or hot; capers cooling	Stimulates appetite, cloves warm digestion, capers mildly astringe	Capers can add a salty touch with fish or chicken, cloves aid digestion, resolve nausea, and support fertility impaired by cold
Flowers	Saffron, Vanilla, Rose (water)	Aromatic	Saffron is warming; vanilla is cooling	All spices are aromatic and moving, but the flower spices work most clearly with <i>shen</i> /spirit	Saffron invigorates circulation and self-expression, Vanilla calms the spirit, relieving overstimulation
Berries	Black Pepper, Allspice	Pungent	Hot, warming	Aids digestion of meats/ protein, stimulates appetite	Use wisely with foods requiring support, careful not to overeat as a result of raising appetite
Seeds/ Fruits/Pods	Cardamom, Chili Peppers, Star Anise, Tamarind, Caraway, Coriander, Cumin, Fennel Seed, Mustard Seed, Nutmeg	Spicy (hot peppers are pungent)	Warming; hot peppers and mustard seed are hot: tamarind is cooling	Opening, spreading, releasing/relaxing, these spices help move emotions and aid digestion	Seed spices help digest grains (the hotter ones, e.g., mustard seed, aid with proteins including fatty meats)

## RECIPES

### *Homemade Vanilla Extract*

Vanilla extract is very expensive, but it's easy to make at home. Take one fresh vanilla bean (actually the stamen of the enormous vanilla orchid, native to Central America). With a finely sharpened knife on a cutting board, carefully split the bean lengthwise. Turning the knife sideways, gently scrape the little black seeds up to one end. Drop the vanilla bean and the seeds into a bottle of rum or brandy, label the date, and put it aside for about three months, shaking it occasionally. When a few months have passed, you will have very high quality vanilla essence, without mystery ingredients.

The use of alcohol may surprise people motivated for good health, but it needn't. My daughter recently asked me why the wine shop we were walking past had a sign for 'spirits' in its window. Reaching for a teaching moment, I explained that, "The 'spirits' in that shop are strong wines that come from bottling the vapors coming off grain as it rots and ferments. Everything gives up spirit when it dies, and some people like to taste the spirit of grapes, barley, rice or corn. Further, for grownups who sip it, it effects their spirit. So, a long time ago these strong wines became called 'spirits'. But if someone has too much, it damages their spirit." Medicinal wines are an ancient tradition in Chinese medicine, and alcohol itself is said to quicken the qi, invigorate the blood and effect the *shen* (which has very strong relationship with blood). Seen this way, extracting vanilla in alcohol is more than just cooking chemistry. The flower herb of vanilla is calming for the *shen* and the alcohol medium also speaks to the *shen* level. Once made, vanilla extract is used like a perfume, just a touch to lighten the spirit of a desert. Even when the alcohol is cooked out, a signature remains, resonating with blood and *shen* without the alcohol itself. And of course, the taste quality of homemade vanilla extract is wonderful.

### *Sautéed Mushrooms*

Vegetarian cooking is not a specialty cuisine, rather it is what we all eat every day, while some people also add animal food to it. It is very important to be skilled at making vegetarian meals. Mushrooms add depth to any meal and contribute many beneficial functions. Mushrooms also pair nicely with a variety of spice/herb approaches. One approach that allows us to reach to a different area of our spice drawer is to cook mushrooms with a hint of nutmeg. Properly balanced, the nutmeg adds complexity and mystery without being easily identified as a solo player. The cook should have some fun, leaving everyone guessing while asking for more.

Nutmeg is a warming spice that aids digestion and scatters cold. It's not possible to say how much to use, or rather, how little. In a pan of sautéing mushrooms (your choice of type), add a shake or two of oregano, tarragon and rosemary, a bit of butter (or olive oil), a splash of tamari, and 2-3 scrapes of whole nutmeg on a grater. If using powdered nutmeg, just the tiniest bit will do—taste as you go, when you can barely notice it you have added enough.

### *Spice Rub for Lamb or Beef*

It is not my interest to judge which diet is best—vegetarian, Paleo, and so forth. All dietary systems can have merit; the question always is what is good for an individual in the present moment. The role of spices and herbs (and cooking in general) is to balance and assist the chosen principal foods from the points of view of being appetizing and easily digested. A meal should be satisfying without throwing us off balance; we should be nicely energized after eating, not tired or in search of sugar or caffeine stimulants. For those who choose to eat meat, that often means using spices and herbs to help prevent food stagnation from the intensity of meat or overstimulation from its yang energy nature.

The spice rub here is simple, delicious and effective.

In a mortar and pestle (or spice grinder) grind the following:

- 1 tablespoon cumin seeds
- 2 tablespoons coriander seed
- 1 tablespoon fenugreek (optional)
- 1 tablespoon grain of paradise seed (optional)
- 2 teaspoons brown mustard seed
- (The seeds above can be toasted in a dry, heavy pan for 2-3 minutes prior to grinding.)
- 3 green cardamom pods
- 1 tablespoon dried rosemary
- 1 tablespoon dried oregano
- 1 tablespoon dried thyme
- 1 tablespoon kosher or coarse sea salt
- 1 teaspoon ground turmeric
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

Once ground into a rough powder, massage directly onto a leg of lamb 4-5 lbs.), or use these spices to make a paste-type rub by adding olive oil and three slices mashed fresh ginger. Cook in a 325F oven until the center reads 135-145F on a meat thermometer. Allow to rest before slicing. The omission of garlic and hot spices makes sense because lamb is a very yang food (distinctly more warming even than beef).

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In general, home cooks allow their spices and herbs to get too old. Consider replacing your dried herbs at least twice yearly. It will improve quality and refresh your attention on the ones you use less regularly. Kitchen herbs and spices are potent tuners of the energetics of life. As thinking of kitchen herbs and spices for their energetics becomes more familiar and more precise, it will become easy to adjust recipes to truly cook for the health and pleasure of yourself and others.

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