

## **Seven things I love about the Ayurvedic approach to cooking and nutrition.**

**By Dr. Shaun Matthews**

1. Ayurvedic cooking is sensual. It encourages us to tune into all of our five senses when preparing a meal. How the food sounds, smells, feels, looks and tastes. The sizzle of mustard and cumin seeds in a saucepan of hot ghee and the waves of aromas that fill the kitchen, the luscious feel of hand mixing a mango and rocket salad, the feast of colours when we stir fry red capsicum, snow peas and yellow squash. Not to mention the tantalising combination of flavours in a Sri Lankan coriander, beetroot and coconut curry.
2. Ayurvedic cooking, above all, honours our intuitive process and encourages us to make full use of it in the process of selecting and preparing our daily food. Rather than having to go to a book and look down a long list of recommended and prohibited foods, Ayurveda acknowledges that our bodymind is essentially wise. By listening to our body and taking heed of its subtle messages we will find those foods that are naturally balancing and appropriate for us. In this sense Ayurveda tries to avoid broad prescriptions about what is good or bad and honours the unique requirements of each individual.
3. Ayurveda, as a science of self-healing is concerned with how to live in harmony with the natural forces of the world. It advocates eating foods that are grown locally and that are in season. In winter we naturally gravitate and feel most nourished by root vegetables, onions and potatoes, warming foods which are cooked and served hot. In summer we tend to want more fresh fruits and salads, cooling foods which are served at room temperature. Apart from being more economical, this approach ensures that the foods we eat are fresh and avoids the problems inherent in storing foods for long periods of time, which depletes the food of its vital energy.
4. Ayurvedic cooking celebrates taste and understands the effect of different tastes on the physiology of the human body. It identifies six different tastes. Sweet, sour, salty, pungent, bitter and astringent. These tastes are used to balance the body's energies and to promote wellbeing.

**Sweet taste** – most fruits and vegetables, rice, milk

**Sour taste** – citrus fruits, vinegar, yoghurt

**Salty** – soy sauce, tempeh, sea food

**Pungent** – ginger, garlic, pepper, onion

**Bitter** – radicchio, endive, dandelion, coffee

**Astringent** – unripe banana, pomegranate, black tea, peanut butter

5. Ayurveda sees food as energy. This is why food made with love and affection and eaten in your own or a friend's home is so much more satisfying than take away and restaurant food. The subtle qualities of food are taken into account and how they

affect our sense of wellbeing and energy. How food is grown, stored and processed is part of this appreciation. Food that is organically grown, fresh off the farm or from the back garden and in an unrefined state has an inherently greater life force than food that comes from mono-agricultural farms, which has been in storage for months to years and which is highly refined and even bleached!

6. Ayurveda luxuriates in herbs and spices. These are used to enhance the flavour of meals, to make food more digestible and to nourish bodily systems that might be deficient or weak. An example is turmeric, known as haridra in Sanskrit, this is a rhizome akin to ginger that has been prized in Ayurveda for centuries. Turmeric is an excellent blood purifier and natural antibiotic which is particularly good for skin and liver disorders. It is particularly useful when there is malabsorption taking place in the body and chronic infections of the skin such as acne. In India it is revered for its power to improve one's complexion.

Other commonly used spices include:

Cumin, fenugreek, garlic, ginger – which are warming digestives.

Coriander – fresh leaves and seeds which are cooling digestives.

Fennel – a cooling digestive.

Curry leaves – impart a wonderful taste to dahls and are useful in malabsorption states.

7. Ayurveda understands the intimate link between our digestion and our health. It sees the gut as the place that we “cook” our food in order to draw the most nourishment from it. This is a complex process that involves hydrochloric acid secreted by the stomach, various enzymes that break down carbohydrates, fats and proteins acting in the small intestine and the influence of bile and pancreatic juices.

Our capacity to digest the food and drinks that we consume is referred to as our agni or digestive fire. In order to have optimal health and energy we need to honour and nurture our digestive fire. This can be achieved only through a holistic approach to our health – an approach which embraces the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions of our being.

At a practical level it means taking time to really honour the act of selecting, preparing and eating our food. Seeing meal-time as a sacred time. Time to be with the food we are eating, to be with the people we are eating with and time to be with ourselves. A time to centre ourselves before the act of self-nourishment. In this regard, rituals, such as a grace of some kind, can be useful in helping us to let go of where we have been and to come into the present moment.