

The Five Tastes: Using your senses to understand herbal therapeutics *Brittany Wood Nickerson, with help from Chinese, Ayurvedic and Cherokee traditions*

Sweet/Bland

The sweet or bland taste is nourishing to the body. It is nutritive and regenerative; it builds and strengthens nerve tissues, connective tissues, and body fluids, including blood, semen, and milk. It is demulcent, emollient, moistening, softening, and soothing. Sweet foods and herbs are important for strengthening and rebuilding in conditions of weakness and deficiency. Sweet or bland foods include complex carbohydrates (grains and starches) and proteins (meats, dairy, nuts). These foods are often called comfort foods, and they are the foods we eat for sustenance. Herbal examples include many roots, such as licorice, codonopsis, astragalus, and marshmallow, along with cinnamon, dates, goji, and fennel. Concentrated simple sugars such as honey, cane sugar, fruit, and fruit juices are healthy and nourishing as carriers of the sweet flavor, but only when used in moderation. In excess, sweetness causes dampness in the system, leading to sluggish digestion, bloating, and stagnant circulation and elimination.

Salty/Mineral Salt

In moderation, the salty taste promotes digestion and is moistening and cleansing. Salt moves body fluids and softens hardnesses. It can help dissolve fatty or fluid-filled cysts and can be helpful when cleansing the blood, lymph, liver, and kidneys. Native American Cherokee tradition breaks the salty flavor into two categories: salt and mineral salt. True salt is the taste of salt itself, refined or unrefined. Mineral salt is the salty or sometimes metallic taste in herbs and foods that are high in minerals, such as nettle, parsley, spinach, and Swiss chard. Sea vegetables have both true salt and mineral salt flavors. Other traditions consider mineral salts to be a secondary flavor in these herbs, rather than a primary one. Mineral salts are deeply nourishing to the musculoskeletal system, including the bones, blood, ligaments, and nervous system tissues, which need sodium, potassium, calcium, and magnesium for proper functioning (minerals that these herbs and foods often contain high amounts of). Too much true salt can lead to swelling and stagnation of the blood, as its stimulating action can aggravate conditions of heat, eroding muscles and tissues. In excess, true salt will aggravate overactive digestion. On the other hand, it is hard to overdo mineral salts, which are generally safe when taken consistently over time.

Sour/Astringent

The sour flavor is toning, contracting, cooling, and moistening. Though we generally consider sour and astringent to be the same, Ayurveda puts astringent into a separate category, categorizing it as cooling to neutral, generally more constrictive, and locally drying. However, generally speaking, both the sour and astringent flavors tighten and tone tissues. Sour is strengthening to mucous membranes, stimulates the liver and gallbladder, and aids in the digestion of fats. Sour foods and herbs include some fruits, such as sour grapes, raspberries, Granny Smith apples, and sour citrus, as well as rhubarb, sorrel, rose hips, hibiscus, schisandra berry, and fermented foods such as sauerkraut, kimchi, kombucha, kefir, pickles, yogurt, sour cream, and kefir. Astringent herbs include sage, rose, and raspberry leaf. Too much sour dries out the local environment, which over

time may lead to overtightened and constricted tissues and consequent conditions of dehydration, tight muscles, and constipation.

Bitter

Bitter is the most metabolically active flavor. It is cooling, drying, detoxifying, and anti-inflammatory. The bitter taste stimulates the entire digestive process through a reflex that begins with the taste buds. The bitter taste on those taste buds activates a physiological reaction that directs the liver and gallbladder to release bile, triggers the secretion of hydrochloric acid in the stomach, and stimulates peristalsis of the digestive tract. The bitter flavor helps with sugar metabolism and is often very good for balancing cravings in someone with a sweet tooth. It is very balancing and grounding, helping to focus scattered energy and emotions. Bitter foods include leafy greens such as frisée, radicchio, dandelion greens, some lettuces, kale, and collards, as well as herbs such as burdock root, yellow dock root, goldenseal root, Oregon grape root, dandelion root, angelica root, artichoke leaf, mugwort, and wormwood leaf. Bitter foods and herbs are cooling, with a few notable exceptions, which is why they are so grounding. Overdoing bitters, or bitters with the wrong constitution, will result in overactive digestion, upset stomach, and diarrhea or loose stools.

Pungent

The pungent category includes spicy and acrid flavors. These herbs and foods are warming, drying, and stimulating. They are used in cooking and herbal formulas for balancing the energy of sweetness. They bring blood to the digestive tract, thus increasing digestive fire and improving digestion and assimilation. Pungent or spicy foods and herbs increase circulation and stimulate the movement of body fluids, encouraging lymphatic circulation. They move blood from the core to the periphery of the body, opening the pores and promoting a sweat. Pungent and spicy foods and herbs expel mucus and give clarity to the senses. Pungent herbs are often antibacterial and/or antiviral. This category includes hot peppers of all varieties, ginger, raw garlic, thyme, rosemary, and black pepper (to name just a few!). Too much pungent will overstimulate the tissues, nervous system, and digestion and lead to exhaustion. In excess, it will dry out mucous membranes and irritate an overly acidic stomach.