

The Six Tastes of Ayurvedic Nutrition

by Shannon Mooney

The first interaction of a food or herb with the body begins with the tongue and the sense of taste, or *rasa*. Ayurveda describes six tastes by which all foods can be generally categorized. They are: sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent, and astringent. Each of these tastes has a different effect in the body. By understanding the way that the tastes affect the three doshas, you can choose foods and herbs that will create balance and healing for your individual constitution.

Every substance is made up of some combination of the five elements, earth, water, fire, air, and ether. The six tastes have certain qualities, or *gunas*, that are attributes of their two primary elements. For example, the sweet taste is composed primarily of earth and water, lending the qualities of heavy, dense, and moist. Because of the axiom “like increases like” one can see how eating many foods with the sweet taste will increase kapha dosha which is comprised of these same elemental qualities. According to Ayurveda, a balanced meal contains all six tastes in order to completely nourish and satisfy the body.

Sweet, or *madhura*, is comprised of earth and water. Its qualities are heavy, moist, oily, and cooling. It is an excellent taste, in moderation, to bring energy, stability, grounding, and vitality. The sweet taste can be found in sugar, dates, honey, maple syrup, and licorice, and more subtly in rice, wheat, and milk. It is anabolic in nature, helping to nourish and build tissue in the body. On a more subtle level, the sweet taste enhances the vital essence, or *ojas*, and promotes a feeling of love and well-being. Consumed in excess, this feeling can become complacency and inertia. Overindulging in sweet foods can especially aggravate kapha dosha and cause congestion, cough, lethargy, and heaviness. The earth and water of the sweet taste can be particularly grounding for vata’s airy, nervous energy. In the right amount the cooling quality of sweet can be soothing for pitta’s fire.

Sour taste, called *amla*, is comprised primarily of earth and fire elements. It has a warming effect on the body, generally promoting digestion. Sour decreases vata and increases pitta and kapha. The sour taste is found in foods such as lemons, grapefruit, vinegar, and yogurt. It can help to stimulate salivary secretions, enhance appetite and aid digestion. In excess, the sour taste can create acid indigestion, hyperacidity, heartburn, and ulcers. For people of pitta prakriti, the sour taste often provides more heat than they can handle. For kaphas, it can cause heaviness as a result of water retention. The sour taste works very well for vatas, stimulating their delicate digestion. Psychologically, sour enlivens the mind, and brings comprehension and discrimination. In excess, it will induce judgment, envy, jealousy, and a “sour grapes” attitude.

Salty, called *lavana*, is composed predominantly of water and fire. The salty taste is heating and heavy. It increases pitta and kapha and decreases vata. Like the sweet taste, it is anabolic in nature. The salty taste can be found in salt, seaweeds, salted nuts, chips, pretzels, many canned foods or dehydrated soups. When taken in moderation, it gives energy, promotes growth, and balances electrolytes. The salty taste stimulates water retention. It is helpful for vatas because it is warming, stimulates digestion and helps to hold in moisture. If an individual is pitta predominant, the heat can be too much, causing imbalance. For kapha, though the warmth is good, the excess water and weight gain long-term can be aggravating. Too much salt in the diet can lead to hypertension, edema, swelling, ulcers, and

hyperacidity. Emotionally, the salty taste enhances the flavors and variety of life, sparks interest, and builds confidence and courage. In excess, it can create kapha disorders of greed, possessiveness and attachment.

Bitter, tikta, has elements of air and ether. It has the qualities of cool, light, and dry. Bitter increases vata and decreases pitta and kapha. The bitter taste can be found in leafy greens like collards, arugula and radicchio, coffee, dandelion and turmeric. It enhances the flavors of all other foods. The bitter taste is anti-bacterial and anti-viral in nature. It is especially balancing for pitta, helping to cool excess heat, aid digestion, and cleanse the liver. It helps to reduce fat and toxins, making it the perfect taste to balance kapha individuals. In excess, bitter will deplete the tissues, causing emaciation, fatigue, dizziness, and extreme dryness. Psychologically, the bitter taste will create a tendency toward introspection. An individual will be able to see reality more clearly. In excess, the bitter taste can lead to isolation, grief and loneliness.

Pungent, katu, is predominantly fire and air elements. It is heating, light, and drying. Chilies, garlic, black pepper, ginger, and asafoetida are examples of pungent foods and spices. Pungent increases vata and pitta and decrease kapha. In moderation, it helps digestion and circulation. Pungent helps to dissolve excess fat, and eliminate it from the body. Excessive amounts of pungent taste can create inflammation, irritation, ulceration, diarrhea, heartburn, and nausea. Psychologically, the pungent taste promotes enthusiasm and clarity of perception. In excess, it can bring irritability, envy, jealousy, and anger.

Astringent, or kashaya, comes from predominantly air and earth elements. The astringent taste increases vata and decreases pitta and kapha. It is cooling, drying, and heavy in nature. Pomegranates, asparagus, green beans, chickpeas, and turmeric are examples of the astringent taste. It improves absorption, is anti-inflammatory and decongestant. Astringent taste helps to stop bleeding by constricting blood vessels and promoting clotting. In excess, it can create constipation, griping sensations in the intestine, and stagnation of circulation. Psychologically, the astringent taste brings grounding and organization. Too much astringent taste can create many vata-type mental disorders such as fear, anxiety, nervousness, and a scattered mind.

To summarize, the first three tastes, sweet, sour, and salty, increase kapha and decrease vata, while the last three tastes, bitter, pungent, and astringent, have the opposite effect, increasing vata and decreasing kapha. Sweet, bitter, and astringent are most helpful in balancing pitta.

According to the ancient texts of Ayurveda, any substance can be seen as medicine. Medicine is defined as a substance that aids digestion. Depending on your choices, foods can be medicinal, can have no medicinal value, or can act as a poison. Ayurveda defines a poison as anything that disturbs digestion. Food becomes medicine when you choose tastes of foods and herbs that balance both your constitution (prakruti) and your needs (vikruti).

Within Ayurvedic nutrition, food and herbs are intricately linked as part of a balanced health regime. Foods are used medicinally to treat the grosser anatomy while herbs are used for healing the mind and body on a deeper, subtler level. Ayurveda includes the use of herbs and spices in every meal because good tasting food activates rasa, our desire to taste, which cultivates a strong appetite, which in turn stimulates agni, the power of digestion. Strong agni is Ayurveda's most important indicator of good

health.

The key to balancing the body with the six tastes is choosing foods and herbs that have the opposite qualities of the doshic imbalance. For example, an individual with excess vata can have weak digestive fire as a result of vata's dry, light, and cold qualities. This type of digestion is prone to gas, indigestion, constipation, and malabsorption. Banyan's Vata Digest herbal tablets are comprised of herbs that are warming (both pungent and salty tastes) to promote regularity and strengthen digestive fire. Pitta's digestion tendency is towards excess heat which can result in acid indigestion, hyperacidity, and heartburn. Pitta Digest contains herbs that are cooling in nature such as guduchi, cumin, coriander, and fennel to neutralize excess acid and dispel heat. Kapha's digestion is slow and steady with a tendency towards a low digestive fire. Kapha's cool qualities can be supported by Kapha Digest, otherwise known as Trikatu. The literal translation of Trikatu is "three pungents" which are ginger, pippali and black pepper. These warming herbs kindle kapha's digestive fire, and burn fat and toxins.

Learning how to take foods and herbs that possess the qualities we need to balance our bodies can also be expanded into the psychological realm. It is important to note the experiences in our lives that are sweet and nourishing, or if a relationship creates a bitter feeling or leaves a sour taste in our mouths. Our emotional thoughts and experiences have an even more profound effect on our health and well-being than does food.

On Ayurveda's path of self-healing, the six tastes are a way to keep your senses alert and explore foods and herbs that will balance your body and mind. Learning how to taste not only the foods in your diet, but your life experiences and how the universe works is yet another practice of Ayurveda that teaches us how to become more self-aware, bringing about true healing.