

food

Ayurvedic eating

Cooling foods for summer

By Linda Egenes

Eating local foods in season is the buzz these days, and it's the smart way to support the environment and the local economy. Yet according to ayurveda, the traditional health care system of ancient India, eating seasonal foods is also the best way to prevent disease.

Food is medicine

As every Iowan knows, each season brings a dramatic change in temperature and humidity. Yet in ayurveda there are only three seasons: the cold and dry fall/ winter (Vata season), the cool and wet spring (Kapha season) and the hot summer (Pitta season).

"As any particular season wears on, imbalances start building in your body. And if these imbalances are not addressed, they can get more rooted in the physiology and become a chronic condition," says Dr. Sankari Wegman, an ayurveda expert at The Raj Maharishi Ayurveda Health Center, a world-class spa and restaurant in Maharishi Vedic City that serves organic, locally-grown vegetables, fruits and herbs from the city's farm and greenhouses.

According to ayurveda, by the end of summer, your body becomes, well, hotter. It's more susceptible to heat rash, skin breakouts and fatigue. Because the mind, body and emotions are connected, the mounting heat can be expressed as irritability and anger. More serious health problems resulting from too much heat in the body include ulcers, eczema and heartburn.

The ayurvedic solution is simple: use your food as medicine.

"If during summer you eat foods that are the opposite of hot, such as cooling, light foods, you can reduce the heat in your body," says Dr. Wegman. "You'll feel cooler and at the same time prevent serious health problems from developing."



Dilled Beans — a light, cooling side dish — is the perfect antidote to summer's heat, as are pulses. Turn to Resources, page 38, for the recipe plus a list of home-grown ayurvedic foods. (Photo by Gary Krambeck)

Six tastes of ayurvedic cooking

Ayurvedic cooking is based on six tastes: sweet, sour, salty, bitter, astringent and pungent.

1. **Sweet:** milk, butter, ghee (clarified butter), rice, wheat and small amounts of raw sugar.
2. **Sour:** yogurt, lemon, aged cheeses and pickled foods (using vinegar).
3. **Salty:** anything with salt.
4. **Pungent:** chilies, ginger, cumin, cayenne, black pepper and spicy foods.
5. **Bitter:** leafy greens, basil, lettuce, nettle, bitter melon (available in Asian markets), Japanese eggplant, turmeric, fenugreek seeds, barley, jicama and aloe vera.
6. **Astringent:** lentils and other pulses (edible beans or seeds), tofu, quinoa, sprouts, apple, pear and pomegranate.

A summer palette of flavors

While every ayurvedic meal includes the six tastes, the idea is to use them in different proportions depending on your individual body type and season.

In the hot summer season, for example, the ayurvedic cook includes more sweet, bitter and astringent tastes, as these are more cooling.

And just as important as the foods you include are the foods that you minimize during a particular season, says Dr. Wegman. "In summer, you want to reduce heat by reducing the pungent, salty and sour tastes."

Dr. Wegman also recommends seasoning your foods with mild spices and herbs during summer. "Many people find that their digestion is slower when the weather is hot, so it's wise to eat lighter," she says. "You can give your digestion a boost with cooling spices, such as cardamom, coriander, fennel, dill, turmeric, mint, basil and cilantro."

Fortunately, the cooling ayurvedic foods — basil, cucumbers, summer squashes and broccoli — are the exact foods you'll find in your own garden and farmer's market during summer. So buy fresh, buy local and buy what's in season — and you've taken the first step to a healthy ayurvedic diet.

For more information about ayurvedic cooking, visit theraj.com or mapi.com. For more ayurvedic recipes, turn to resources, page 38, or read this story at radishmagazine.com.