

# CULINARY + MEDICINE

WILL CULINARY MEDICINE HELP US  
LOOK AT NUTRITION IN A NEW WAY?

BY AMELIA LEVIN

**P**lant-based. Paleo. Vegan. Vegetarian. Gluten-free. Everything-free. “Diet” talk, these days, brings with it many multipart, intricate and often confusing connotations and ideas. But what if we were to go beyond these trendy terms to approach nutrition in a different way, one that speaks to natural/Eastern medicine circles and culinary-driven ones at the same time?

Enter the term “culinary medicine.” It’s a daunting one, of course, perhaps eliciting visions of doctors wielding whisks and other kitchen tools. But the reality is, it’s a term that’s currently helping to bridge the longtime separations between the clinical and the culinary in the U.S. It’s a term that can reference simply good food, as well as good-for-you food. And it’s one being used by culinary-minded doctors and nutrition- and wellness-focused chefs alike.

So, what does “culinary medicine” mean? And, is it truly relevant in today’s culinary profession?

“Culinary medicine means blending the art of cooking with the science of medicine to create restaurant-quality meals and beverages that can help prevent and treat disease,” according to John La Puma, M.D., a trained chef and clinical practitioner who has centered his career on culinary medicine and treating his patients more holistically. Author of *ChefMD’s Big Book*

*of Culinary Medicine: A Food Lover’s Road Map to Losing Weight, Preventing Disease, Getting Really Healthy* (Harmony, 2009), and co-author of national best-seller *The RealAge Diet: Make Yourself Younger with What You Eat* (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2002), along with other books, La Puma is also founder/clinical director of Chef Clinic®, Santa Barbara, California, where he sees patients who want to improve their health the natural way, using food.

For example, by growing broccoli in a sustainable way and cooking it lightly versus charring it, and pairing it with the right foods, such as healthy oils and fats, we can activate even more naturally nutritious compounds in the food, not to mention enhance the flavor, La Puma explains.

Culinary medicine goes well beyond the idea—and current trend—of “clean eating.” It is about choosing naturally and sustainably grown and produced foods and spices to not only enhance the flavor of and add more balance to dishes, but to offer what some insist are natural health benefits beyond supplements and pills.

Culinary medicine only partially explains the anti-inflammatory diet and lifestyle initially introduced by Dr. Andrew Weil that has become the basis for the popular fast-casual

## CULINARY MEDICINE SPICES FOR HEALTH AND TASTE

Chef/nutritionist Natasha MacAller's latest cookbook, *Spice Health Heroes: Unlock the power of spice for flavour and wellbeing* (Jacqui Small, 2016), profiles the many herbs and spices used to treat and prevent diseases as well as add flavor to many dishes as an alternative to adding salt and sugar. MacAller recommends purchasing organic spices whenever possible to ensure that they are not grown or produced with pesticides and other chemicals. Store spices in airtight containers in cool, dark places to maintain their potency and freshness.



### TURMERIC

This native Indian and Southeast Asian cousin to gingerroot has a rich, earthy taste and bright-yellow color when dried and ground into a powder. Turmeric contains curcumin, which is thought among Eastern medicine experts to help combat inflammation in the body to prevent disease and help muscles recover after strenuous use. Scientific studies have yet to prove that as fact, because turmeric is a food, but some point to it working just as effectively as manufactured painkillers. Use the spice in curries, smoothies, yellow cakes, Middle Eastern *ras el hanout* and other condiments and sauces, or, as MacAller uses it, in a non-sugar molasses-infused pumpkin pie for extra depth and color.



### PEPPERCORN

This ubiquitous spice naturally contains piperine, which helps boost the absorption of vitamins and nutrients found in other foods and spices, such as turmeric. In traditional medicine, it has been singled out for use in pharmaceuticals developed to help the absorption of chemotherapy medicine. A teaspoon a day of peppercorn is considered in culinary medicine circles to help with circulation and act as a cleanser. Also, try using whole or lightly crushed pink peppercorns to add a pop of crunch and heat to dishes. Green peppercorns can add brightness and a slightly tart flavor to lighter dishes with chicken, fish and mostly vegetables.



### CINNAMON

Look for Ceylon cinnamon, which has been hailed by nutritionists as the "true" cinnamon spice because it has the most health benefits, such as reducing blood sugar, even with less than a teaspoon a day. Other more commonly found types of cinnamon (such as cassia) have been shown to have higher levels of coumarin, which is a natural blood thinner. Compared to most commonly found cinnamons, Ceylon cinnamon has a less pungent, more delicate and slightly sweeter taste that lends itself well to desserts, but try it also as a rub for meats and a flavor developer in dark, rich stews and sauces.



### FENUGREEK

Nicknamed the "nutribullet spice" by MacAller, this traditional component of curries has a wide range of health benefits, according to Eastern medicine experts, including balancing blood sugar, disabling digested toxins, boosting breast milk and improving appetite among chemo patients. Thanks to its complex herbal flavor and maple scent, MacAller has used it in desserts, from a fenugreek-based poaching liquid for pears to a component of a dessert dukkah with date sugar, toasted cumin and nuts.



### STAR ANISE

The most active compounds in the oils of this common Chinese spice are thymol, terpineol and anethole, which have been used to treat coughs and flu, according to MacAller. When consumed as a tea, it can improve digestion and reduce bloating while imparting a licorice-like flavor. Steep it in brothy soups and teas for sous-vide cooking, or as a complex poaching liquid for mild fish and vegetables.

chain LYFE Kitchen, headquartered in Memphis, Tennessee. On LYFE menus, you'll find dishes such as power green salads and quinoa crunch bowls, as well as pizzas and entrees loaded with multicolored vegetables that are more about the quality of the food being consumed than calorie counts.

"Culinary medicine is the umbrella, and anti-inflammatory is just part of that," La Puma says.

## BREAKING DOWN SILOS

For as long as anyone can remember, there have been two camps in the U.S. in the formal nutrition/dietitian, world: the clinical and the culinary. But often, those two camps had little do to with each other. In hospital settings, for example, you wouldn't see a chef interacting much with the dietitians, or vice versa. Now, however, things are changing.

"There is still a disconnect between the nutrition and culinary worlds, which is actually why I got my chef training after being a dietitian," says Sara Haas, RDN, LDN, a Chicago-based dietitian/cookbook author and a former spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, Chicago.

ABOVE, LEFT: A turmeric-based smoothie with tropical fruit and coconut milk might help with inflammation and sports recovery.



Even today, dietitians and hospital staff are reluctant to recommend certain foods for treatment for legal reasons. And, there is a gaping hole when it comes to scientific studies demonstrating the powers and health benefits of certain foods.

Widespread dissatisfaction with conventional medical approaches, increasing suspicion of processed and convenience foods, and conflicting weight-management advice are just some of the reasons La Puma cites for why the idea of culinary medicine and treating oneself through food and other natural, holistic measures seems to be growing in popularity and curiosity among consumers.

### INSTITUTIONALIZING NUTRITION

“I do feel that there is change on the horizon, and that’s perhaps most evident by the growth of healthy fast-casual restaurants,” says Haas.

We’re also seeing more yoga studios with smoothie shops, Olympic sports medicine programs paired with good nutrition, gardens at hospitals, schools and universities, and more. According to reporting at WBEZ-Chicago, some 30 medical schools now offer some form of culinary medicine training. And several cooking schools in Denver, Seattle, and Berkeley and Sonoma, California, are edging into a culinary-nutrition curriculum, La Puma says.

Registered dietitian Lindsey Pine, MS, RDN, CSSD, CLT, has been working with the University of Southern California

(USC) to develop menus not only with better taste, but with enhanced nutrition. “I help to brainstorm, advise and give suggestions on dishes and ingredients to ‘healthify’ menu items, integrate trending ingredients, add more plant-based items and accommodate a variety of special dietary needs,” says Pine, who worked with university chef Nathan Martinez to develop a 100% plant-based station at USC’s Village Dining Hall. The station offers Buddha-style bowls with plant-based proteins, whole grains, veggies, flavorful sauces and supplemental superfoods such as flax and chia seeds, as well as gut-health-improving add-ons such as sauerkraut and other fermented foods.

One of the “principles of a sustainable menu” at USC is to lead with menu messaging around flavor, selling healthy and sustainable food choices by their flavor rather than actively marketing health attributes. “Research shows that taste trumps nearly all, even if customers want chefs, on some level, to help them avoid foods that increase their risk of chronic disease,” a USC dining report states. “Messages that chefs care and are paying attention to how and from whom they are sourcing their ingredients—such as by naming specific farms and growing practices (e.g., organic)—can enhance perceptions of healthier food choices.”

ABOVE, LEFT: Pink, black and green peppercorn-rubbed salmon. ABOVE, RIGHT: A tropical smoothie bowl with chia seeds.



## WHAT'S GROWING IN CHEF MD'S GARDEN

Chef John La Puma, M.D., best-selling author and founder of Chef Clinic®, is known for his extensive garden with a variety of naturally nutritious foods. These are all plants and herbs that any chef with a garden can grow, depending on the region. Here are his current favorites with many health benefits.

### BLOOMING ARUGULA

“This cruciferous plant related to broccoli, daikon and watercress has important fiber and phytonutrients that work together to make it a powerful detoxification agent, especially in terms of liver detoxification. It can help neutralize the enzyme damage that too much iron and red meat can cause.”

### UNIQUE CITRUS

“I really love yuzu and Buddha's hand and kaffir limes—the leaves have antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties and the juice is floral and special. I also like Seville oranges, which are typically used for marmalade but that have high tenefrin content. Tenefrin is used in many medicines for weight loss. And bergamot oranges have a naturally occurring statin that helps lower cholesterol. And they have an amazingly floral taste, as they are used in Chanel No. 5.”

### RED SERRANO CHILIES

“The flavor of these chillies come from the flesh, so if you take out the seed, you get more of the sweet pepper flavor and less overpowering heat. The redder the chili (versus the more popular green serranos), the higher the vitamin C content and the sweeter the taste.”

## COOKING AND STORING MEDICINAL FOODS

Pairing certain foods with others can help boost natural nutrients. “I always pair avocado and nut oils with spinach and other dark leafy greens, because not only do the healthy fats improve the taste of the vegetables, they also enhance the vitamin K absorption,” La Puma says.

He combines fresh herbs with dried to enhance certain nutrients. Fresh marjoram, for example, has high levels of triptolene (anti-nausea) and antibacterial/anti-inflammatory properties in the form of vitamin C and beta-carotene that gobble up free radicals in the body. But fresh herbs are water-soluble, so these important nutrients can evaporate. Adding a little of the dried herb will help bring those nutrients back, not to mention balance a dish with a more pungent note. Always rub dried spices between your fingers before adding them to dishes to activate the oils, where most nutrients live.

Cooking vegetables—or not—can impact their nutrient content. For example, cooking tomatoes versus eating them raw actually helps activate their heart-protecting lycopene components, La Puma says. “That's why I like combining raw tomatoes with a little tomato paste, because the paste is cooked and concentrated, and you can absorb four times more lycopene that way.”

The way you store food matters, too, says La Puma, though health department regulations sometimes take precedence. “If you store melons on the counter as opposed to the walk-in cooler, the beta-carotene and lycopene compounds are enhanced rather than destroyed, and these vitamins can help prevent the ‘rusting’ of arteries that can lead to stroke, heart attacks and premature wrinkling.”

As more chefs around the country are looking at gardens, produce suppliers and local farms for fresher ingredients, part of taking a more “culinary medicine” approach simply means training the eye to know how to cook and pair some of these common staples to enhance their health benefits. In so doing, the philosophies and foods that are a part of Eastern (and Native American) medicine and cuisines can begin to make their way into today's more modern versions. ■

ABOVE: John La Puma's kitchen garden with, clockwise from left, Mexican oregano, epazote, Syrian oregano, Greek oregano and blooming lemon thyme, and center, pineapple mint.

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