



# NATURAL SOLUTIONS

Clinical Kinesiology, Acupuncture, & (w)Holistic Healthcare

Susan L. Levy, D.C., DABCO, FIACA

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## The Five Tastes and How They Interact with Your Organs

You may notice that foods have specific taste characteristics. In traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture lore of many centuries, the Chi (or energy) of food is described as one of five specific flavors, tastes or qualities. These tastes are **pungent, sweet, bitter, salty, and sour**.

It is also true that most foods and beverages can be analyzed to have a complexity of various flavors and tastes that are often layered. Just ask any [sommelier](#) (a professional one taster) to describe the taste of a particular wine. One word will simply not do, it may require a treatise to describe the various qualities of the tastes of the wine from first sip to palette to swallow to aftertaste.

Recognizing that many foods have a variety of flavors, for this purpose imagine that you only need to identify *the predominant taste* or flavor of a food. This will allow you to begin to correlate how various foods support or conflict with the major organs of your body, as well as the five elements and the colors and other qualities that represent them.

### PUNGENT OR SPICY

The first flavor we will consider is called **Pungent** (or spicy). The pungent flavor correlates with the metal element, the late fall season, and the related organs. These are the lungs and the large intestine. The related color is white and is reflected in some of the foods such as onions, scallions, garlic and ginger.

Peppers of all varieties to include chili and other hot flavors are classified as pungent tastes. This flavor helps move Chi through the body from the lungs to the large intestine and onto other organs. We can think of the pungent flavors as having qualities to inspire movement in the body. The breath, the blood flow, and lymph circulation may all be helped by pungent foods.

One example would be using hot and spicy soup to ward off a cold. If this is used when the first symptoms appear, the body may be stimulated to perspire and exhale and otherwise eliminate the toxic effects of the pending illness.

Vegetables considered to have a PUNGENT quality include artichoke, cabbage, collards, corn, horseradish, leeks, onion family members, red radishes, and turnips.



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## SWEET

*Sweet* is the taste that many people prefer. However, we must balance our intake of sweet with the other four requisite and beneficial tastes.

The sweet flavor correlates with the earth element and directly influences the spleen, pancreas, and stomach. These organs (most specifically the pancreas) directly interact with carbohydrates and regulate sugar metabolism in the body. The earth element is represented by yellow that is characteristic of yams, corn, squash, and carrots. The earth element correlates with autumn, the early fall season when these foods ripen. Several earth element foods are root crops, intimately connected to the earth.

Physiologically, we have a predilection for sweet because, in general, sweet fruits and berries are not poisonous, while very acrid or tart berries may be poisonous or at least cause diarrhea. In nature, we can observe fruits and berries that birds eat most likely are safe for human consumption. It is always best to positively identify anything you would consume while foraging out in nature.

Processed foods have an abundance of excess sugar and sweet flavors added, simply to promote sales of these products. One example would be high fructose corn sweetener with which is added to many foods and beverages primarily to cause addiction. The [health detriments](#) of this additive are overwhelming.

The sweet flavor is thought to be calming, relaxing, and nurturing, but this benefit is turned on its head with an excess of sweetness that can disturb the blood sugar balance and feed inflammation in the body.

Chronic abuse of abundantly sweet processed foods and the inflammation that they cause can result in a multitude of disease processes including diabetes, arthritis, heart and vascular disease, and even kidney failure.

From the traditional Chinese medicine approach, sweet foods are known to assist the body with self-detoxification, to bolster energy, mitigate fatigue, nourish the spleen and blood supply.

Whole food examples of appropriate sweet foods include apples, beans, carrots, cabbage, chestnuts, cinnamon, parsnips, squash, sweet onions, sweet potatoes, and turmeric.

Whole grains also fit in this category, especially rice, followed by barley and millet. Corn is traditionally considered a sweet flavor but must be organic and non-genetically modified.

Many fruits are classified in sweet category, the quantity may need to be limited in certain cases. Apples, berries, figs and [longan fruit](#) are classic examples of balanced sweet fruits.



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## **BITTER**

The third flavor to understand is **Bitter**. This one is very important to nourishing and feeding your organs of the fire element. The prominent organ of this element is your heart. The fire element includes your small intestine, the covering around your heart called the pericardium, and the Triple Warmer Meridian that involves your thyroid and metabolism.

Heart disease is fostered by excess sweet but can be nutritionally mitigated by including bitter herbs and foods in the diet. The fire element relates to summertime, the greatest intensity of climatic heat and sunshine of the year. The color red represents the fire element as well as the color of your heart and arteries. Some red foods to consider are red beets, cherries, red cabbage, red grapes.

Many people need to strive to add bitter flavors to their diet. Growing an herb garden and a variety of salad greens is one way to facilitate adding more bitter into your diet. I take a colander and scissors out to my green garden and snip of fresh salad frequently during the summer and early fall seasons.

Bitter foods can help body fluid drainage and balance heat and dampness in the body. In the Western world, herbalists and nutritionists have encouraged people to use dandelions, all parts of the plant are useful including the leaves stems flowers and roots (if the area it grows in is pristine and never had been sprayed with pesticide). You can add any of these to salads. You can use dandelions root as a tea. I always keep dandelion tincture available in my office. The bitter flavor actually stimulates saliva formation and promotes the digestive process.

Here are examples of wonderful and helpful bitter foods: arugula, black radish, burdock root, celery and celery root, collard greens, dandelion, endive, kale, mustard greens, parsley, and sesame seeds. I often steam up a pot of mixed greens adding dandelion to kale, collards and [wild lamb's quarter](#). Tonic water with a little bit of quinine is a traditional treatment and preventative for malaria. This bitter beverage may also make the body more resistant to other infective agents.

## **SALTY**

The **Salty** taste is the second most popular taste. Some people need to use restraint and not overdo adding salt. As you may know salt was a [valuable commodity](#) for trade historically. Salt has traditionally been used as a preservative for some dried foods (to include jerky) and pickled foods.

The food industry adds salt to many processed foods to spike the flavor since most processed foods are so denatured and nutrient depleted that they have little remaining flavor. Many times, the food industry adds some form of sugar to the salt to add more and diverse flavor and to increase the addictive value of their product to promote their sales.



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When you read the label of a highly processed food or even a canned food, you can rest assured that the salt used is basically sodium chloride and does not include any trace minerals. Some products sold as sea salt are refined and the trace minerals are removed to yield a very white salt. Real salt®, Himalayan salt, and gray sea salt (Celtic® salt) do include multiple trace minerals in a synergistic formula and help to balance the sodium and potassium in your body. These unrefined salts are colored by their mineral content ranging from pink to gray.

Appropriate use of a trace mineral rich, unrefined salt can actually help prevent the occurrence of high blood pressure and even help prevent preeclampsia and eclampsia in pregnant women. Medical treatments for these conditions usually recommend omitting salt. Trace mineral containing salt should be used, perhaps sparingly, while commercial table salt and food-industry-sourced salt should be totally avoided in these health conditions especially, and to promote health for anyone.

The salty taste is germane to the water element and directly affects the kidneys and the urinary bladder. The water element's season is winter and the accompanying cold weather conditions. The water element is represented by the colors blue or black.

This salt flavor can add a bit of heat to counteract the cold winter. This flavor also helps fluid balance in the body and gives life to our cells. When the salty taste is balanced in the body it assists elimination of both liquids through the urinary system and solids through the intestinal system. Adding a little bit of appropriate salty food may help with lymphatic flow and prevention or resolution of benign lumps and bumps in the body.

The salty foods acknowledged in Traditional Chinese Medicine have generally been blended with sea salt. The traditional salty foods include salt, tamari, miso, pickled vegetables (many vegetables are amenable to pickling), umeboshi plums. Numerous forms of seaweed are nutritious and full of minerals from the ocean. Most common [examples](#) include arame, dulse, hijiki, kelp, and wakame.

You will recognize many of these foods as being incorporated into a macrobiotic diet and lifestyle. However, anyone can incorporate these foods into their diet. By doing so in a balanced way you can reduce your body's craving for salt, which may lead to consuming fewer processed foods.

A simple way to add seaweed is to soak the dried seaweed 30 minutes and drain it a few times to remove the excess salt. Save your rinsed seaweed in the refrigerator for several days and add a tablespoon or two to various soups, mixed vegetable dishes, or salads. One salty food that is not on my list of potential choices is jellyfish.



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## SOUR

Many people avoid **sour** tastes but should learn to incorporate them into their diets to help their bodies build immunity and to cleanse. The sour flavor relates to the wood element that not only applies to trees but all living above ground plants. The wood element is symbolized by springtime and the emergence of the green shoots. The liver and the gallbladder are wood element organs and appreciate a little sour flavor. This can be as simple as adding lemon or lime juice to your salad, to your water, and to your cooked vegetables.

Sour foods are thought to feed and enhance the liver and gallbladder, the wood element organs. Sour tastes have an astringent quality, exemplified by putting undiluted lemon juice in your mouth, this causes a little puckering and begins the flow of saliva to stimulate digestion. Traditional Chinese medicine teaches that the sour flavor can reduce excessive perspiration, keep your arteries supple, and balance the energy of your body fluids.

There are numerous examples of sour foods. Fermented foods qualify as sour and include pickles (salty and sour), sauerkraut, kimchi, and olives. Lemons and limes and their juices are excellent sour food condiments and additions to your diet.

Organic apple cider vinegar is another wonderful sour food that also helps your microflora in your intestinal tract. Many nutritionists recommend using the juice of half a lemon in water in the morning to wake up the digestive system and to instruct the liver to begin doing a self-cleaning process. Fruits with a tart flavor including green apples, grapes, persimmons, pomegranates, raspberries, strawberries are sour tempered with a sweet finish.

Please review this article periodically,  
and remember to include each of the five flavors in your diet.