Cool Food

Making your summertime eating light, tasty and easy

June 1, 1996 By Patrick Donnelly

I cherish the summer. I do my Chinese exercises in the garden every morning, looking up at the green branches of ailanthus (the tree that grows in Brooklyn). I ride my bright red bicycle everywhere. I experience the heightened sense of well-being that comes from watching handsome people wearing very little.

But summer brings its own stresses, especially heat. Extreme temperatures can be exhausting to those of us living with AIDS. The body is always working to maintain balance, and has its own tools -- some of which are not great fun, like sweating or chills -- to bring itself back into equilibrium. We can assist the body by using the natural properties of food and choosing appropriate cooking techniques. This may leave our bodies freer to focus on healing.

Several thousand years ago, observant Chinese people noticed that when anything becomes extreme, it's just about to flip over and become its opposite. (At 4:30 a.m., for instance, night is about to become day.) This principle applies to using food to stay cool. If I eat a lot of food that's hot (either in terms of temperature or spiciness), I initially get hot, too. But then I sweat and cool down -- so the ultimate effect of eating very hot foods is to become cool. To skip the sweating process, eat cool- or room-temperature foods.

Here are some other summer eating tips:

Choose shorter cooking processes. In summer, we instinctively recoil from baking and roasting, which heat both the kitchen and us. Try steaming or quickly stir-frying foods.

Eat less animal foods, which are all warming. Get protein instead from beans and soyfoods. Soyfoods are very cooling -- and are full of cancer-inhibiting compounds -- did you ever crumble cold tofu (soy curd) by hand? You could get frostbite!

Eat more salads, sprouts, fruits and freshly made juices, which are cooling and cleansing. Of course, people with extreme immune imbalance need to be careful about eating raw foods of any kind -- and raw animal foods should be totally off our menus, due to bacterial risks. But we can safely eat raw fruits and vegetables by washing them carefully in filtered or boiled water. Some people also soak them for a few minutes in a solution of water and food-grade hydrogen peroxide (35 percent strength, available at pharmacies and health food stores). Raw plant foods are full of

immune-supportive enzymes. If you have digestion problems, go easy at first -- experiment with the ratio of raw to cooked that works for you -- but in extreme heat use as many raw foods as you can.

Eat seasonal foods, preferably grown in your climatic region. This helps our bodies adapt to the season and place that we're in. In summer we turn to the beautiful dark leafy greens, which are delicious lightly steamed and dressed with a few drops of extra-virgin olive oil and lemon juice. (Always buy the highest-quality cold-pressed oils and keep them refrigerated. Rancid oils are a source of free radicals -- unstable molecules which may speed disease progression.) Beet greens, bok choy, collards, dandelion, kale, mustard, spinach, Swiss chard and an incredible variety of lettuces are now widely available.

One caution: It can be tempting on a hot day to consume very cold foods, like frozen desserts or chilled drinks. These are, on average, 60 degrees colder than our normal stomach temperature. The stomach can't digest food that cold and has to expend vital energy warming itself up. This isn't usually a problem for healthy people, but could be for those already weak or experiencing digestive problems.

Here's a recipe for a day at the beach (or the tar beach): A whole meal incorporating several cooling and immune-supportive foods:

Lemon-Dill Rice Salad

salad ingredients
2 cups long-grain brown rice (or mix with basmati or wild rice)
3 cups pure water
1 large head of broccoli
3 medium carrots
1 block firm tofu (or 11/2 cups of any cooked beans, if soy-allergic)
1 medium cucumber
1 summer squash (yellow or zucchini)
Bunch of freshly chopped dill leaves (or 1 teaspoon dried)
A few colorful lettuce leaves (like arugula or radicchio)
dressing ingredients
1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil
Juice of 2 large lemons (or 1 orange or 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar)
1/2 teaspoon sea salt
1 tablespoon stone-ground mustard
(Adjust seasonings to taste)

method

- Wash rice and put in a covered saucepan with the water and a pinch of salt. Bring to a boil, then lower to a simmer. Cook 45-50 minutes, or until rice is tender. Take off heat and set aside to

cool.

- Carefully wash broccoli, carrots, squash and tofu and cut into bite-sized pieces. Steam each vegetable separately (using steamer or sieve or colander in covered pot), just long enough to bring out the color and take off the edge of rawness -- they should still be slightly crunchy. (Don’t steam the cucumber, just wash and slice it.)
- Combine steamed veggies and tofu with rice and chill. Separately combine the dressing ingredients.
- Just before serving, add dill and dressing to salad. Line a bowl with lettuce leaves, add dressed rice-vegetable mixture and garnish with cucumbers.

yield: 4 to 6 servings

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