

ACUPUNK

Field Notes of a Contemporary Alchemist

by Kaz Wegmuller, L.Ac.

Eating and Being Eaten

The winter season always makes me appreciate the joys of feasting. The Thanksgiving turkey and the Christmas ham urge me to take it easy, get comfortable, sleep a lot. “Time to hibernate,” they purr from deep inside my gut. There’s something about the cold weather that triggers this ancient mammalian drive. Most of the time we ignore it. But during the holidays the kids don’t have school, my wife has two weeks off from work, the clinic slows down, and for a few glorious lazy days I eat more and do less than I normally do.

Now, don’t get me wrong. The post-feast sloth is a joy in its own right, but the eating is definitely the main event. To prepare a large meal with family and friends, to sit down and eat together when you are hungry is a joy that’s hard to beat. In fact, whether or not it’s the holidays, eating for me epitomizes the joy of being alive.

Clearly, just as evolution has wired us to enjoy sex, we are programmed to enjoy eating. DNA wants us to keep on living so that we increase our chances of making babies and hence more DNA. Ergo, we like to eat, and we like to make love.

Speaking of food and sex, Chinese medicine describes our vitality, our *qi*, as coming from two main sources. The first source is our parents, and by extension our ancestors. This type of *qi*, called “pre-natal *qi*,” is passed on genetically and is said to be stored in the kidneys. Pre-natal *qi* is the *qi* of sexuality and reproduction, and we only get a finite amount of it. We can’t really build it up, but we can squander it through too much sex and drugs and rock n’ roll. The second type of *qi*, called “post-natal *qi*” because we start to absorb it after we are born, comes from the air we breathe and the food we eat. The lungs and digestive system are the domain of this kind of *qi*.

How can these theories contribute to our health? Well, number one is: don’t over-spend your pre-natal *qi* through fast living and reckless habits. Younger readers will scoff at this advice, but older readers will nod knowingly. Number two is: keep breathing (if you feel you need help with this, find a good *qigong*

instructor or a yoga class). Number three is (you guessed it): keep on eating.

But what to eat? Since I believe that all food is good, I don’t like to give lists of “good” and “bad” foods. So here are a few health-oriented suggestions instead: Cook your own food. Eat regularly. Don’t overeat (except at infrequent feasts). Eat seasonal, local foods. Incorporate in your own diet what your ancestors ate many generations ago. Eat a varied diet. Set time aside to enjoy your meals.

Ultimately, all diets from macrobiotics to vegan are based more on ideology than on anything else. Often, in the New Age circles in which alternative medicine thrives, there is an unspoken assumption that cleanliness is next to Godliness, that if you could only cleanse all those toxins from your liver or manage to avoid certain karmically incorrect foods, you will ascend to the “next level,” a realm that by definition you are not in now. I’m not arguing that these diets are necessarily unhealthy, but I do think that they can create guilt and neurosis, neither of which contributes to good health.

My own food ideology has to do with honoring our biology, and embracing enjoyment. By honoring our biology, I mean that the human digestive system evolved into its present form over the course of at least two million years of hunting and gathering. What this means is that we are optimally fueled by an omnivorous diet consisting of a large variety of fruits, vegetables, roots, tubers, grains, seeds, and meats. Archeological evidence shows quite plainly that the shift to agriculture, with its reliance on a few key foods, had a disastrous effect on human health (it also triggered the population explosion that we are reeling from today).

As for embracing enjoyment, I believe that pleasure is inherently healthy. Those French studies showing that red wine is good for you probably have as much to do with the attitude towards food of the people studied as they do with the chemical properties of red wine. We will all be eaten one day. But until life eats us, let us eat life! Bon appetit!