

Go back to your roots



The hunt for the Panacea of long life has frustrated mankind for as long as we can remember. Elusive like the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Does it even exist?

In my part of the world, folk wisdom and astrology says that 120 is the maximum achievable lifespan for human being. Yet I have not heard of anyone reaching that milestone. Should our goal be to push the envelope of longevity or improve the quality-of-life vis a vis our health?

We need to fix what is broken. And what is broken is our relationship with food.

I believe that food is the single most important factor for good health.

Every day we are bombarded with new studies on food practices of “Blue Zones”, benefits of superfoods and why it is imperative to jump on the bandwagon immediately. There is a rush to blend elixirs loaded with antioxidants, conjure a million ways to eat kale, chug down turmeric lattes by the bucketful, and the list goes on. In this extremely interconnected world where access to information is instantaneous and unrestricted it is easy to be seduced by new and better ways of doing things. The confusion is real with all of us being dragged and tugged in a million directions. It is time to stop and take stock of the situation.

Many of us have cultural roots and access to indigenous/traditional food practices of our parents and grandparents that have been around for hundreds if not thousands of years. Food cultures that are strongly grounded in the intimate knowledge of local produce, nutritional benefits and medicinal value. Preparation of meals was not only to fuel the body but also a means of incorporating lifesaving ingredients to keep disease at bay. Food was medicine and the kitchen was a storehouse and pharmacy of life saving ingredients and practices. The beauty of these food practices is that they were dependent upon locally obtained flora and fauna or ingredients that were readily accessible in those markets.

Today we live in an environment where food preparation is driven by fads, taste, convenience and other commercial considerations. Attention to health and nutrition is all but forgotten. For example, what was once a traditionally boiled food item may now be fried and/or drowned in heavy sauces to augment taste and appeal to a new market segment. The emphasis on taste, convenience and speed has resulted in the adulteration and vulgar tweaking of traditional food in

an effort to stay relevant in the competitive food industry. Anyone in the know would tell you that traditional mandarin food bears little resemblance to “Chinese takeout” or that Sri Lankan “short eats” have no relationship to indigenous food.

What I am trying to flush out is not the idea that old ways are undisputedly better. But the idea that we can take tried and tested best practices from our indigenous food cultures and merge them with modern knowledge to arrive at an optimal solution. Transmission of knowledge related to indigenous and traditional food is now limited due to changing lifestyles, migration and dispersion of families, changes in biodiversity and agricultural practices.

The key points understand are:

What foods were traditionally eaten by our ancestors (Fruits, vegetables, yams, grain and protein)

Methods of food preparation (boiled, dried, pickled)

Ingredients used (herbs, spices, fats)

Combinations of foods eaten together in one sitting or during the day

Foods were often eaten in certain combinations using spices and herbs to accentuate positive qualities and mitigate adverse effects. For example, Turmeric is commonly used to spice curries in South Asia. To enhance absorption, they add coconut milk or other fats and black pepper. It is the same with consumption of eggs. When eggs are consumed in a meal, they often added garlic, curry leaf and dill seeds to protect the cardiovascular system.

Foods often stayed closed to their original form. A yam or tuber could be identified as such after preparation. There was minimal processing to retain as much nutritional value as possible.

There is no denying that our bodies are under siege. By going back to our roots and recovering this rich information on our ancestors’ dietary practices, we will be able to create a regenerative, therapeutic and nutritious diet that will result in fewer diseases and a long meaningful life.

I end this short article with the following extracts

The evolution of diet by Anne Gibbons

These examples suggest a twist on “You are what you eat.” More accurately, you are what your ancestors ate. There is tremendous variation in what foods humans can thrive on, depending on genetic inheritance. Traditional diets today include the vegetarian regimen of India’s Jains, the meat-intensive fare of Inuit, and the fish-heavy diet of Malaysia’s Bajau people. The Nochmani of the Nicobar Islands off the coast of India get by on protein from insects. “What makes us human is our ability to find a meal in virtually any environment,” says the Tsimane study co-leader Leonard. Studies suggest that indigenous groups get into trouble when they abandon their traditional diets and active lifestyles for Western living. Diabetes was virtually unknown, for instance, among the Maya of Central America until the 1950s. As they’ve switched to a Western diet high in sugars, the rate of diabetes has skyrocketed.

-The National Geographic Society

Indigenous Food Cultures: Pedagogical Implication for Environmental Education

By Suleyman Demi

The dimensions of nature and culture that define a food system of an indigenous culture contribute to the whole health picture of the individual and the community – not only physical health but also the emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of health, healing and protection from disease.

It is therefore evident that Indigenous food systems are not only vital for human sustenance but also constitute a treasure of knowledge that contributes to well-being and health, environmental sustainability and cosmic balance of the ecosystem which could be harnessed for the benefit of all human kind (Kuhnlein, 2010)

International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) Kortenaerkade 12, 2518AX The Hague, The Netherland

