

Cooking Tao

By Aaron Schlosser

“The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.” This old saying holds true for both sexes I believe. It has typically been interpreted to mean that if you want a man to love you, fix him good food. My experience with cooking has made me think of this phrase in a new way. Through food preparation, we are sharing what’s in our heart with the hearts of others. When our hearts are compassionate and mindful, cooking becomes a means of cultivating these qualities in ourselves and spreading nourishing energy to others. This is a lesson I learned and experienced through vegetarian cooking classes that my Tao teacher held.

My local Tao community was beginning to grow, and together we were learning just how important it is physically and spiritually to be vegetarian. Not only is being vegetarian a good way to prevent diseases and chronic health problems, but it also allows us to practice compassion with every food choice we make. Choosing to show compassion for animals with every meal helps create a more fruitful environment for positive self-development. I will leave more detailed explanations of the benefits of vegetarianism to other articles. Suffice it to say that we wanted to be vegetarians, but that being a healthy vegetarian meant more than eating cheese pizza and microwave bean burritos everyday. We wanted to be able to get the nutrients we needed, avoid chemicals and pesticides in food when we could, and explore the dietary principles in traditional Chinese medicine. We were lucky to have a local Tao teacher with many years of professional cooking experience and a broad knowledge of traditional Chinese medicine, so we convinced him to give us cooking lessons.

We gathered a small group of students: some practicing Tao, others not, some vegetarians, some vegans, and some people who ate meat. We met every other week and were taught two dishes per class. We learned where to find and how to prepare Chinese vegetables and meat substitutes. We were introduced to various types of tea and learned about their therapeutic properties. Our teacher included nutritional advice and suggestions for students who suffered from allergies or other problems.

Traditional Chinese Medicine and Cooking

He taught us about the principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine and how it applies to food. Two central concepts to Traditional Chinese Medicine are Qi (chi) and the Five Element theory. Qi is the pervasive energy that sustains life and vitality in its various forms, and Five Element theory is a philosophical system that illustrates the relationships between different elements of various systems. Different foods are classified by their element and by their effect on the Qi, and this is taken into consideration when cooking.

For example, one application of the Five Element Theory is in the balance of flavors. The five flavors according to the Five Elements are sour (wood element), bitter (fire element), sweet (earth element), pungent (metal element), and salty (water element). One of the methods by which to create really nourishing meals is by balancing these flavors, either within the same dish or in the combination of dishes within a meal. One dish that required attention to balance was the ever-popular General Tso’s Tofu. Learning to find the proper balance between the soy sauce (salty), sugar (sweet), vinegar (sour), and chili pepper (pungent) was not an easy task. Our teacher acknowledged this difficulty but did not provide exact measurements to recreate his own recipe; instead, he left it to us to learn the art of balance for ourselves. This tactic was very frustrating at first, but I know now that it has made me a much better cook. It forced me to build up my own instincts for combining ingredients and spices, allowing me to successfully improvise more often. Now, I frequently find myself following the Five Elements instinctually in my cooking, with delicious and nourishing results.

Another application of the Five Elements is by color. The five colors are green (wood), red (fire), yellow (earth), white (metal), and black (water). Along with combining and balancing the five flavors, combining and balancing the five colors is a way of ensuring a wider range of nutrients are present in a meal. Our teacher taught us that nature gave us hints to guide us to the foods that will nourish us. The hints can be present in the flavor, color, scent, or even the shape of the fruit, vegetable, or nut. Thousands of years before the advent of modern nutrition, humans could find clues to what foods would nourish them by these naturally occurring properties. The organs of the body are classified by the Five Elements in this way: liver (wood), heart/blood (fire), stomach (earth), lungs (metal), and kidneys (water), and when someone is suffering from a deficiency with one of these organs, foods with associated properties can be prescribed to assist with alleviating the condition. For example, long before the discovery of vitamin C and its ability to help the blood absorb iron, red fruits and vegetables were suggested for blood-related deficiencies by virtue of their common element, fire. It turns out that many red fruits and vegetables are high in vitamin C: tomatoes, oranges (falls into the "red" category as well), strawberries, raspberries, carrots, and so on. Of course, not all red food has the same properties, and frequently the means by which certain foods fortify certain organs is through the characteristics of its Qi, which is, for the most part, clinically immeasurable and therefore not necessarily supported by Western science. Regardless of its validation by Western science, following my teacher's advice to strive for a variety of (naturally occurring) colors in a meal is both healthy and aesthetically pleasing.

Here is a short list of ingredients that were featured in the class and were recommended for their healthful properties.

Ginger is commonly found in Asian foods. It is good for awakening the appetite, lessening nausea, and fighting off colds. Our teacher recommended drinking ginger tea in the morning. Fresh ginger can be boiled in water for 5-10 minutes to make a great tea (you can add brown sugar if the ginger taste is too strong).

Daikon radish is a long white radish used extensively in Japan and China. It helps with digestion, particularly if you have eaten too much (as I frequently did at these classes). Our teacher would serve daikon raw, cut into strips, with hoisin sauce for dipping. Daikon is also delicious in vegetable sushi and in soups and stews. It is good to eat in the evening.

Shiitake mushrooms were featured in many of the dishes we learned. They are energizing and good for the immune system. These mushrooms are recommended for people with diabetes, high blood pressure, and cancer. Our teacher would use dried shiitakes, clean them, soak them in water for about 30 minutes, and squeeze the water out before slicing and stir-frying them. He always encouraged us not to waste anything, so he would tell us to save the water in which we rehydrated the mushrooms and use it in our soups and stir-fries. This turned out to be a delicious idea. Water used for blanching vegetables was also saved and used in this way.

Pu'erh/Chrysanthemum Tea is a combination of two complimentary teas. Pu'erh tea (named after the region in which it is harvested) is sometimes labeled as "Dieter's tea" because it aids in digesting fatty foods, reducing cholesterol, and detoxifying the body. Chrysanthemum tea is made from boiling dried chrysanthemum flowers. It has a light, sweet flavor and has a cooling effect on the body. It is prescribed to improve vision and to strengthen the liver and lungs.

Cooking With Love

Perhaps the most important ingredient our teacher recommended was love. In anything we do, if we can keep a calm heart full of love and compassion, the results will be much better. This is why many people claim that their mother's home-cooked meals are always the best. They can sense the care that went into the preparation and be nourished by it. What is in their mother's heart is shared through the food to the heart of her children.

Though this rang true to me when I learned it, when I began to pay attention to the effect of our teacher's food on the students, the truth of this dynamic became quite clear. The food was delicious, that much was easily true, but the effect on the students was more profound than just a reaction to tasty food. As the classes went on, the students would smile more warmly, talk more frequently, become more animated, stay long after the class was over, and even their faces showed a healthier glow.

Learning to cook became more of a collective experience. We shared our experiences of trying out the recipes at home and learned from each other's mistakes. We took "field trips" to Asian grocery stores and often got groceries for classmates who couldn't make it. We invited each other over to cook together or try out each other's cooking. This was quite a different social setting for me. For years most of my social settings were centered around drinking alcohol, usually to the point of drunkenness. It was quite new for me to have a social experience focused on something that was healthy for the body, mind, and spirit. Cooking a delicious vegetarian meal for my friends was clearly a better way to connect with them than was buying them a round of beers.

I was living alone at the time, so I would try my best at home to hone my cooking skills so that I could reach a point where I could invite others over to eat. I was prone to making mistakes. For example, my first attempt of General Tso's Tofu came out more like General Tso's Jell-O because I hadn't learned the proper amount of corn starch to use. Despite my various mistakes along the way, my kitchen gradually became transformed into a spiritual center of my living space. Uncluttered with the heavy energy of unhealthy food and meat, it became a space where my heart's intention could take a nourishing material form. I also noticed, and have experienced since, that the act of cooking vegetarian food in my living space is akin to stoking the fires of the hearth. Energetically, the living space develops a warm glow the more often I cook there.



Food Exchange

Long after I had taken those cooking classes I wanted to create a similar experience where we could share the benefits of cooking vegetarian food. I had noticed that the most difficult time for a healthy meal was lunch. Like many people, I work roughly nine to five and eat my lunch away from home every weekday. Eating out is expensive and tends to be far less healthy than anything I would cook at home. Making lunch every morning before I leave for work is a good habit that has always eluded me. So with the help of my Tao community we came up with a solution. We decided to meet every Sunday to exchange food we had cooked. It was basically a potluck except that the food was to be eaten after the event. Each participant cooked a large amount of one dish, split it up into portions (usually in Tupperware containers, hence these food exchanges were nicknamed "Tupperware Parties") for all the other participants to take home with them and eat over the course of the following week. We used scheduled online invitations to keep track of who was coming every week and what they were making. We shared recipes, nutritional advice, and cooking tips. Everyone involved ended up saving money, learning more, eating healthier, meeting more people, and sharing in the energy we cultivated together.

These experiences have shown me the power of a spiritual practice in something as seemingly mundane as cooking. I owe a great deal of my personal growth to these experiences with cooking and sharing vegetarian food with others. I have been able to discover new ways of approaching food, nutrition, and even socializing with people. My depth of appreciation and awareness has increased as well as my physical health. I extend my thanks to Young Suen, our cooking teacher, for taking the time to teach us.
