



The Six Different Tastes in Ayurveda

By Leah Collmer



There are six different tastes (rasas), known in Ayurveda for the body and mind to experience. Rasa is a Sanskrit word which also means essence. These six tastes are sweet, sour, salty, pungent (spicy), bitter and astringent.

The ability for the body and mind to experience and perceive taste is an amazing phenomenon. Different areas of the tongue have the ability to sense and decipher different tastes: the tip for sweet, the lower-outer sides for sour, the lower-center for pungent, mid-center and mid-outer sides for bitter, the upper-outer sides for salty, and the very back of the tongue for astringent.

There are three doshas (natures or constitutions), in Ayurveda, Vata, Pitta and Kapha. Vata's quality is drying, Pitta is heating, and Kapha is heavy and moist. Each individual dosha and taste is comprised of two different elements: air, ether, fire, water, or earth, with one element more dominant than the other. From these elements, each taste derives its own experience, effects and benefits for the body that not only



satiates our hunger, but provides essential qualities, centering body and mind as we navigate life. By knowing the properties of each food you eat, one can better bring balance and harmony into all aspects of one's life.

Increasing properties and elements:

- Astringent, bitter and pungent (all drying), increases Vata, made of ether and air.
- Pungent, sour and salty (all heating), increases Pitta, made of fire and water.
- Sweet, salty and sour (all heavy), increases Kapha, made of earth and water.

Decreasing properties and elements:

- Salty, sour and sweet decreases Vata made of ether and air, drying.
- Astringent, bitter and sweet decreases Pitta, made of fire and water, heating.
- Pungent, astringent and bitter decreases Kapha, made of earth and water, heavy.

It is important that each meal should have all the tastes. However, depending on your own prakruti (genetic disposition or inherent nature), and vikruti (current imbalance), different tastes can be more emphasized and others more limited. Additionally, the geographical area you live in along with the present season also influences the quantity and intensity of rasas (tastes), that should be included when preparing a meal.

It is natural that we gravitate towards different tastes. However, these personal preferences aren't always as beneficial as we'd like to believe. Often a craving, desire or tendency to favor a certain food comes from a place of imbalance within us. To indulge in that craving, perpetuates that imbalance. Eventually, if one continues in this way, this imbalance becomes more extreme allowing different stages of disease to set in. Eating all six tastes always helps keep the body in balance. Food is one of our biggest medicines.

Sweet – Is made of earth and water. Properties are heavy, cooling, oily. It is grounding and nourishing. Classic examples: rice, milk, oatmeal. Reduces Vata and Pitta. Increases Kapha.

Sour – Is made of earth and fire. Properties are liquid, oily, hot, heavy. Helps the digestive process. Classic examples: limes, lemons, citrus fruits. Reduces Vata. Increases Pitta. In moderation for Kapha.



Salty – Is made of fire and water. Properties are heavy, oily, hot. It is the least hot of all the heating tastes. Increases energy and strength. There are five different forms of salts: sea salt, rock salt (i.e. Himalayan), black salt, salt from sea foam, salt from the earth. Reduces Vata. Increases Kapha. In moderation for Pitta.

Pungent (Spicy) – Is made of fire and air. Properties are hot, dry, light, sharp, aromatic. Breaks up stagnation. Good for Kapha. Classic examples are hot peppers, paprika, ginger, cayenne. Reduces Increases Pitta. Kapha. In moderation for Vata.

Astringent – Is made of air and earth. Properties are dry, cold, heavy. Classic examples are legumes and cruciferous vegetables. Reduces Kapha and Pitta. Increases Vata.

Bitter – Is made of air and space/ether. Properties are cool, light, dry. Classic examples are turmeric, aloe, dandelion greens, fenugreek. Reduces Pitta and Kapha. Increases Vata.

In Ayurveda, like increases like. What does this mean? It means that opposites create balance, and like perpetuates its own similar qualities. If we eat something heavy and unctuous, that will increase weightiness and oiliness in us. Similarly, if we eat something astringent, that will decrease heaviness and oiliness in us, bringing more dryness and lightness, as these are astringency's qualities.

Inherently, we like who we are and we like what is familiar to us. That is why we often gravitate towards foods that are similar to us in nature, when we really need the opposite to bring balance. This illustrates why going with what you desire isn't always a good thing. Eating with a little awareness and discipline can bring long term satisfactory benefits that far outweigh a momentary morsel of the munchies.

It is very important to really taste food and not just consume it as a means to an end to satisfy our hunger. Tasting food itself is a necessary part of the process for the brain and other organs. By chewing thoroughly this allows the tongue to fully experience and revel in all the tastes.



Sweet Foods - ghee, whole milk, maple syrup, oatmeal, coconuts, dates, figs, mangos, melons, prunes, avocados, beets, carrots, cucumbers, sweet potatoes, winter squash, yams, corn, oatmeal, rice, wheat, almonds, cashews, macadamia nuts and pecans, pumpkin, sesame and sunflower seeds, red lentils, yellow dal (yellow mung), urad dal (black dal, gram or lentil); and spices: anise, *fresh*, *sweet* basil (known as Genovese basil), cardamom, coriander, cinnamon, dill, fennel, poppy seeds, rose, saffron. Honey is a food that while sweet, can also be used by Kapha, due to its heating property.

Sour Foods: buttermilk, sour cream, fresh yogurt, citrus fruits, kiwi, any sour fruits, tamarind, tomatoes, fermented foods.

Naturally Salty Foods: sea salt, rock salt (i.e., Himalayan), black salt, salt from sea foam, salt from the earth, celery, fish, gomasio, miso, tamari, seaweed, soy sauce. The five salts listed here all are essential for health, and making a blend is a guaranteed way to ensure consumption. (Note that table salt is not included as it is heavily treated and includes additives.)

Pungent Foods: All peppers are pungent: bell peppers, chili peppers, habaneras, jalapeños, asafetida, cardamom, cayenne, cinnamon, cloves, cumin, ginger, garlic, horseradish kohlrabi, leeks, mustard greens, mustard seeds, onions, radishes, sage, uncooked spinach, turnips, thyme, turmeric, wasabi, mustard seeds and greens, radishes, peppercorns, buckwheat, spelt.

Bitter Foods: bitter melon, burdock root, eggplant, collard, dandelion and mustard greens, kale, Jerusalem artichoke, yellow dock, lettuce: butter, green, iceberg, red, romaine, red; black pepper, cacao, cloves, hing, certain caffeinated teas, coffee, cumin, dill, fenugreek, mustard seeds, paprika, saffron. Don't get excited, though. Ayurveda doesn't recommend either coffee or chocolate due to their having been highly processed, additionally to their nature of blocking deep channels in the body.

Astringent Foods: rye, apples, particularly green, blueberries, cranberries, berries in general if not very sweet, pears, pomegranate, black, white and green tea, green bananas, broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage cauliflower, white potatoes, turmeric, bay leaf, aloe vera, dry basil, coriander, nutmeg, parsley, rosemary, vanilla, the white peel inside citrus fruits, in general beans or lentils, particularly black eyed peas and garbanzo.