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Bitter's role in diet is pretty sweet

BY DAVID HAMMOND November 15, 2012 8:07PM

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"Bitter pill." "Bitter end." "Bitter truth."

Nothing about "bitter" has positive connotations for Americans.

We like salty and sweet, of course. We tolerate sourness in, for instance, lemonade and Key Lime pie. We're learning to recognize and appreciate umami. But bitterness? Well, that's another story.

To many Americans, if food is bitter, something is wrong. Bitterness in food is an accident, an error, a mistake. Such negative feelings about bitter tastes are not universal.

In Northern India, for instance, meals typically follow a trajectory from bitter to sweet. Saurav Banerjee, executive chef at the Oberoi Grand in Kolkata, explained to me that he designs meals in the Ayurvedic tradition of combining all flavors, including the bitter.

"Early in the meal," Banerjee said, "we eat shukto, a bitter vegetable preparation. It's a palate cleanser. When you start bitter, you appreciate other flavors more. In Bengal, we say the more you cry, the more you laugh."

This bitter note is frequently provided by bitter melon (AKA bitter gourd). You'll find bitter melon preparations at many Chicagoland Asian restaurants, including the Indian Ghareeb Nawaz (2032 W. Devon), Chinese Lao Sze Chuan (2172 S. Archer) and Vietnamese Nha Hang (1032 W. Argyle).

At the old Thai Grocery on Broadway, owner Eddie Lin told me that during flu season, bitter melon combats infection. In the annals of Asian culinary medicine, this warty gourd is appreciated for its taste as well as its curative properties.

A common accompaniment to chicken, bitter melon complements the turkey leftovers we'll soon be plowing through.

Here's a super simple bitter melon-turkey dish: peel and seed the vegetable; sauté until tender; add turkey pieces; eat. It doesn't get much easier than that.

In the same way that herbal bitters like Angostura and Fernet Branca aid in digestion, so vegetable bitterness may relieve bloated bellies. Digestive aids also are, of course, something many of us can appreciate during post-Thanksgiving recovery. And bitter melon might even fight flu bugs you've been exposed to over the holiday.

So, reconsider bitter on your plate and palate. It can be good for your health and your digestion.

A few bites may be all it takes to overcome Western culinary prejudice and enjoy bitterness.

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