

## **Aromatic Spices in Chinese Medicine**

**By Jessica Baker, LAc, RH (AHG)**

'Tis the season for warming carminative spices! Many of us associate cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves with pumpkin pie, hot apple cider, and holiday cookies, but they are also some of our most important herbal medicines. The exoticness of their fragrances has fueled their trade and popularity for centuries, making them now common spices in kitchens around the world.

Spices have distinct medicinal properties and have been present in cooking since time immemorial. It is ingrained in our nature to add spices to our food. In China, using herbs and spices as both food and medicine is so deeply rooted in their culture that most people know the energetic and therapeutic properties of many spices, such as ginger, cinnamon, onion, scallion, and ginger. In the United States we are a myriad of cultures from across the globe and many of us are just now beginning to rediscover the traditional foods of our ancestors.

Centuries of trading spices have created a lot of overlap in spice use among different cultures. I think of spices as aromatic diplomats, spreading familiarity through olfaction and digestion, creating innate physiological reactions that unite us all. Enticing humans with their fragrant, savory scents (and medicinal qualities), spices are still highly sought after and distributed all over the globe. Millennia later, they are still bringing people closer together.

My love of Chinese medicine is partly because of the sophistication of their use of herbs and spices. There has been an unbroken herbal tradition that spans at least two thousand years. Although highly researched and respected by the medical community, herbalism is still rooted in classical energetic theory. Each herb has its own distinct taste, temperature, function, and indication and is described eloquently in Chinese herbal literature.

When using herbs or spices medicinally, it is important to know diagnostically whether the treatment principle calls for warming or cooling herbs, and whether someone has dampness or dryness. Chinese medicine understands that all herbs and spices cannot be used interchangeably, because their properties are uniquely different. Those that are similar in function are appointed to the same herbal category. The categories help discern what herb is appropriate to use in different patterns of imbalance and can give some direction in whether you need to disperse cold or heat, transform damp, or regulate energy. Most spices can be used safely in small amounts, as seasoning for our meals or to reduce bloating or nausea after eating. It is only when using therapeutically that you want to know the properties of each spice.

### **Aromatic Spices that Release Exterior Cold**

#### ***Cinnamon Twig/Gui Zhi (Cinnamomum cassia)***

***Taste & Temperature:*** Spicy, sweet, and warm

Cinnamon twig induces perspiration and warms channels and collaterals so it is the main herb for releasing exterior wind-cold where there is an absence of sweating.

***Fresh Ginger/Sheng Jiang (Zingiber officinale)***

***Taste & Temperature:*** Spicy and slightly warm

Fresh ginger induces perspiration, warms the lungs to stop coughs due to cold, and reduces nausea and vomiting. Fresh ginger reduces toxicity of seafood poisoning.

**Aromatic Spices that Dissolve Damp**

***Sha Ren (Amomum villosum)***

***Taste & Temperature:*** Spicy, warm and aromatic

Sha ren is essential for cold, damp stagnation in the digestion. It reduces abdominal and epigastric pain and distention, nausea and vomiting by transforming dampness and expelling it out of the body.

***White Cardamom/Bai Dou Kou (Amomum kravanh)***

***Taste & Temperature:*** Spicy, warm and aromatic

White cardamon regulates digestive energy, strengthens the stomach, and dissolves dampness. It treats abdominal pain, nausea, and a feeling of heaviness or congestion in the chest and/or body.

***Cao Guo (Amomum tsao-ko)***

***Taste & Temperature:*** Spicy, warm and aromatic

Cao Guo treats abdominal pain that is caused by cold and damp. Cao Guo also treats cold, damp type malaria because of its warm, dry nature.

***Grass Cardamom/Cao Dou Kou (Alpinia katsumadai)***

***Taste & Temperature:*** Spicy, warm and aromatic

Grass cardamom is used for vomiting of clear liquids, loose stool, and abdominal pain due to a cold, damp digestion. It is a very drying herb, so should only be used in small amounts if used as a spice.

**Aromatic Spices that Warm the Interior**

***Cinnamon Bark/Rou Gui Pi (Cinnamomum cassia)***

***Taste & Temperature:*** Spicy, sweet and hot

Chinese cinnamon bark is used to strengthen mingmen fire (gate of life), it is excellent for treating internal coldness that causes abdominal pain, vomiting or diarrhea

***Dried Ginger/Gan Jiang (Zingiber officinale)***

***Taste & Temperature:*** Spicy and hot

Dried ginger is hot in nature and is used for epigastric and abdominal pain with chronic diarrhea due to yang deficiency or internal coldness

***Cloves/ Ding Xiang (Syzygium aromaticum)***

***Taste & Temperature:*** Spicy and warm

Cloves are a key herb for warming digestion and treating abdominal fullness, vomiting, nausea, and hiccups

***Fennel Seed/Xiao Hui Xiang (Foeniculum vulgare)***

***Taste & Temperature:*** Spicy and warm

Fennel seeds disperse cold and relieve pain in the liver and kidney channels. They are essential to treat cold type hernias or swelling and hardness of the scrotum.

Fennel seeds also regulate energy of the digestion and improve appetite.

***Star Anise/Da Hui Xiang (Illicium verum)***

***Taste & Temperature:*** Spicy, sweet and warm

Star anise is wonderful for treating a cold digestion that causes abdominal pain with bloating, vomiting, and nausea

***Black Pepper/Hu Jiao (Piper nigrum)***

***Taste & Temperature:*** Spicy and hot

Black pepper disperses cold in the digestion and reduces nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea and abdominal pain. It can also be applied topically for toothaches.

***Long Pepper/Bi Ba (Piper longum)***

***Taste & Temperature:*** Spicy and hot

Long pepper is used for abdominal pain with vomiting and diarrhea due to a weak, cold digestion.

This is a small fraction of the herbs and spices that Chinese medicine incorporates in their dietary and herbal therapy. Spices can be used medicinally in teas, pastes, powders, and added to food. Seeds of mustard and pepper are even used externally for pain and to draw toxins out of the body. Be cautious when using spices topically, as they will irritate the skin. When taking internally, only a small amount is necessary if used as a flavoring, but for therapeutic purposes usually 3-6 grams are added to formulas.

Spices are a good place to start if you have been curious about Chinese medicine, but were intimidated by not knowing what the nuances of their herbal theories. In their spices, will find familiar plants everywhere, like cinnamon, black pepper, fennel, and clove. As you work with them, you may begin to see the world a little differently. You may start to sense the vibrancy of their medicine and understand why they have contributed such an important role in Chinese culture and cuisine.

I'd like to share two of my favorite recipes using Chinese spices. One is a delicious digestive tea and the other is a strengthening tonic to add to veggie or bone broth. May the aromatherapy of the spices enliven your body and soul!

***After Dinner Digestive Tea***

***6 White Cardamom seeds (Amomum kravanh)***

***6 Hawthorn berries (Crataegus laevigata)***

**3 teaspoons of Rose petals (*Rosa centifolia*)**  
**1" Vanilla bean (*Vanilla planifolia*)**

*Simmer all ingredients except Rose petals in one pint of water for 15 minutes. Make sure pot is covered so aromatic properties do not disperse in the air. Turn off heat and add Rose petals. Cover again and steep for 3-5 minutes. Strain out herbs and set aside. Drink 1/4-1/2 cup of tea after a large meal. Add honey if desired.*

***Hearty Health Tonic***

**6 grams Dang Shen (*Codonopsis pilosula*)**  
**6 grams Bai Zhu (*Atractylodes macrocephala*)**  
**3 grams Sha Ren (*Amomum villosum*)**  
**1 gram Gan Cao (*Glycyrrhiza uralensis*)**

*This is a versatile recipe, as these herbs can be added (in a muslin bag) to your usual vegetable or bone broth, rice stock, or decocted into a medicinal tea. These herbs strengthen qi (vital life force energy) and regulate and tonify digestion, making them an excellent weekly addition to your wellness practice.*

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Jessica Baker is an acupuncturist, herbalist, aromatherapist and educator. Her passion for sharing the messages of the plants is reflected in her private practice and her classes on aromatherapy, herbalism, and Chinese medicine. As a continuing education provider, she teaches at several herbal symposia and acupuncture conferences throughout the U.S. Jessica teaches at The Colorado School of Clinical Herbalism and is an Assistant Supervising Practitioner at the Colorado School of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Jessica is a professional member of the American Herbalists Guild and the Colorado chapter of the American Herbalists Guild. She is on the faculty of the Holistic Cannabis Academy and is a Cornerstone Business Leader at Women Grow. Jessica's book, *Plant Songs: Reflections on Herbal Medicine*, will be released in January 2018.

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