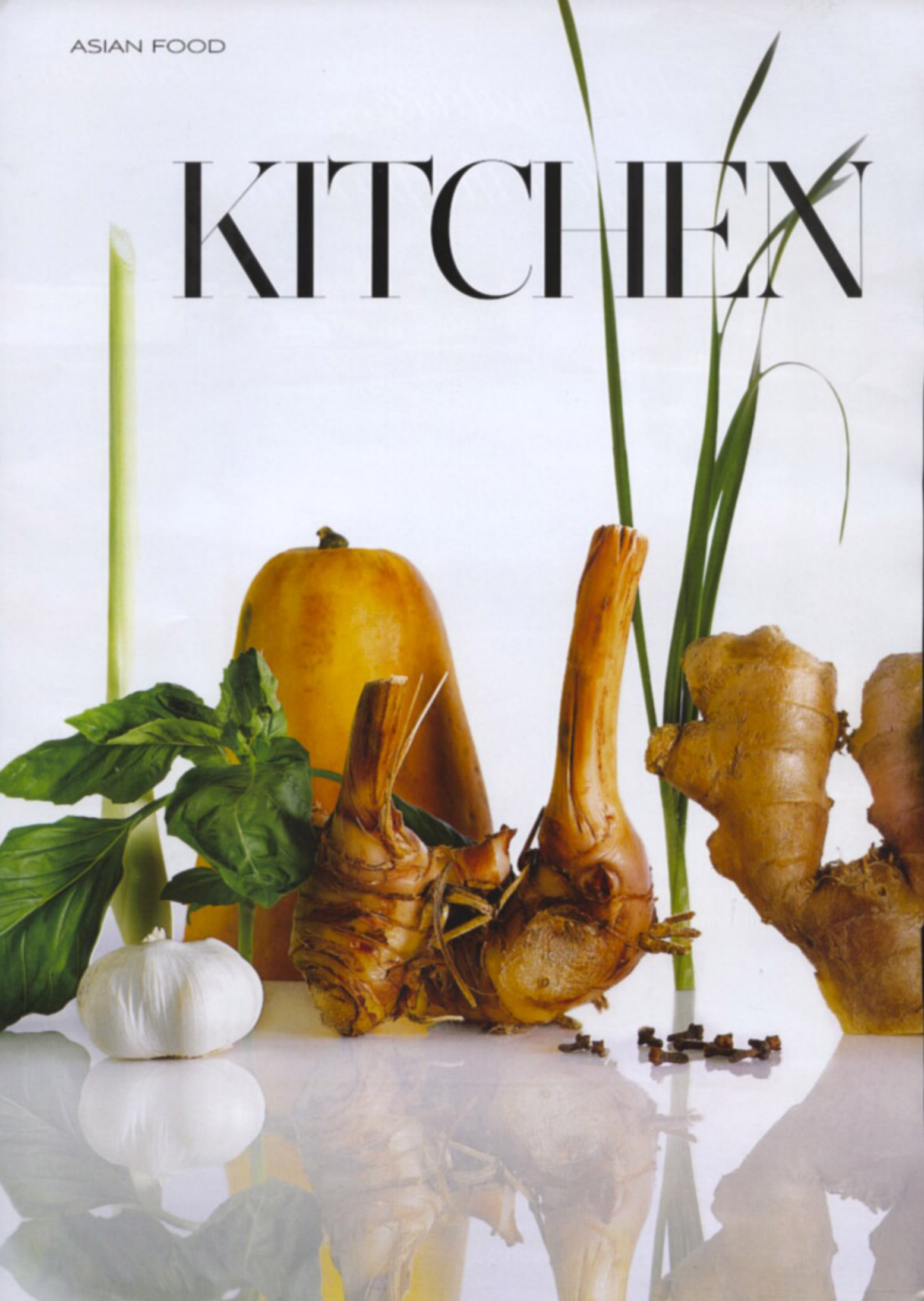


ASIAN FOOD

KITCHEN



PHARMACY

TAKE A PEEK INTO THE ASIAN PANTRY AND
YOU'LL FIND THAT THE DOCTOR CAN BE
KEPT AWAY, THANKS TO THE REGION'S RAW
INGREDIENTS, DISCOVERS KAREN J COATES



The elderly man wears a white turban and layers of grey robes, defying a stubborn heat. The air hangs heavy and humid in his Malaysian home.

I am here to ask Tuanguru Ustaz Haji Hashim questions about a conservative Muslim school he founded 50 years ago – but I'm preoccupied by his repetitious reach for a bowl of cloves.

"I eat at least 10 every day," the Islamic leader says. His doctor recommended raw cloves for a healthy heart, good eyes and a keen brain. At 84, he attributes at least some of his energy to the pungent little dried flower buds of the tropical evergreen, *Syzygium aromaticum*.

For more than a decade, I have reported on news and culture across Asia, and no matter the purpose of my interviews, my sources invariably gravitate toward food – and health, and the intersection of the two. In Laos, I learn local insights: eating chilli keeps you young, and bitter vegetables fight malaria. In the Kelabit Highlands of Borneo, a villager tells me the water inside an unopened pitcher plant acts as a medicine for the gut. In the far northeast Indian state of Nagaland, locals eat garlic to lower blood pressure and cleanse the body. "We say when you put a lot of garlic in our curry it kills all the poisons," my guide Neitho explains. Tribesmen also eat beneficial critters. "We call this medicinal worm", a Naga woman tells me at a local market, pointing to a tray of little crawlies.

In Asia, food and health are topics at the core of daily life – especially in rural areas. The Asian pantry is far more than a repository of food; it is the kitchen pharmacy.

ชายสูงอายุที่ฉันมาสัมภาษณ์โดยเอื้อมมือหยิบ
กานพลูจากชามอยู่เรื่อยๆ จนฉันเกิดความ
สงสัย เขาบอกว่า เขากินกานพลูวันละกว่าสิบ
ก้าน ตามคำแนะนำของหมอที่บอกว่ากานพลู
ดีต่อสุขภาพ กว่าสิบปีที่ผ่านมาเขาและ
วัฒนธรรมของเอเชีย ไม่ว่าหัวข้อข้าวของจีน
จะเกี่ยวกับอะไร ผู้ให้สัมภาษณ์ของฉันมักโยน
เรื่องราวไปเกี่ยวกับอาหารและสุขภาพเสมอๆ

สำหรับชาวเอเชียแล้ว อาหารและสุขภาพเป็น
เรื่องสำคัญในชีวิตประจำวัน ตั้งแต่อาหารใน
ท้องครัวก็เป็นตู้เก็บยาไปในตัว งานวิจัยสมัย
ใหม่ชี้ให้เห็นว่า สมุนไพรอย่างกานพลูช่วย
เสริมสร้างการทำงานของอินซูลิน ลดไขมัน
คอเลสเตอรอล เพิ่มประสิทธิภาพระบบการ
สูดฉีดเลือด ยารักษาโรคแบบโบราณมักอยู่ใน
รูปของอาหาร ทั้งแกงแบบไทยๆ เฟอของ
เวียดนาม และซูปปลาเปรี้ยวแบบกัมพูชา
มีสารต้านอนุมูลอิสระและสมุนไพร
ที่ช่วยป้องกันโรคมากมาย

So, was Hashim right about his cloves? Turns out he was. Modern research shows these little spice buds can help improve insulin function, lower cholesterol and glucose, boost cardiovascular health and dramatically benefit people with diabetes. These pluses are enhanced when combined with cloves' common culinary partner, cinnamon, which also helps to lower blood sugar and cholesterol and has antimicrobial qualities. Chinese medicine has relied on cinnamon for centuries to fight everything from diarrhoea to the common cold.

Most ancient medicines centre on food, and most ancient cuisines have been eaten with good health in mind. Thai curry, Vietnamese pho, Cambodian sour fish soup – each is packed with antioxidants and ingredients that fight disease. Look towards India, and we find roots to one of the world's oldest

healing sciences, Ayurveda. The word itself derives from two Sanskrit concepts that mean 'knowledge' and the 'maintenance of long life'. This ancient philosophy combines mind, body and spirit in its pursuit of wellbeing. "Diet is the most important way of doing this," writes the Indian historian and food scientist, KT Achaya. His book, *The Story of Our Food*, quotes the Charaka Samhita, the oldest most authoritative text on Ayurveda:

"Without a proper diet, medicines are of no use; with a proper diet, medicines are unnecessary." >

Thai and Japanese scientists found that Thailand's famous tom yam soup contains key ingredients – galangal, lemongrass and kaffir lime – that interact in ways to promote their cancer-fighting abilities

This thinking thrives today in places historically influenced by Indian culture. Prasan Fargrajang, known as Pip, runs the Thai House homestay and cooking school on a canal outside Bangkok. She spends nearly as much time explaining which ingredients cure what ailments as she does demonstrating down-home Thai cooking. "You have to know the culture of the food," she insists. In addition to her standard menu of soups, curries and stir-fries, Pip offers an array of motherly wisdom: turmeric is good for stomach and skin, ginger and galangal for stomach, tom yam soup for colds, wax gourd for cooling the body, kaffir lime for clear skin and shiny hair, Chinese flat-leaf chives for controlling high blood pressure, pea eggplants for lowering cholesterol, and lemongrass for relaxing the muscles.

In that vein, she tells me how to make a simple but essential lemongrass tea: boil water, add lemongrass slices (crushed for potency), stir, simmer and boil again. That's it. Serve warm or cold, with or without sugar.

Folk remedy it may be, but hard science now knows the Thai kitchen harbours serious cures. In a study of extracts from 40 edible plants commonly used in Thai dishes, researchers from Kyoto University found that more than 75 per cent of those plants – particularly species in the ginger and citrus families – contain substantial tumour-

คุณป๊อ แห่งโรงแรมและโรงเรียนสอนทำอาหารไทยเฮาส์ ใช้เวลาอธิบายคุณสมบัติของสมุนไพรต่างๆกับการสอนทำอาหาร คุณป๊อบอกเคล็ดลับแต่โบราณว่าโบราณ เช่นขมิ้นดีต่อท้องและผิวพรรณและตำยาช่วยรักษาโรคหัวใจ แม้ว่าจะเป็นเคล็ดลับแต่โบราณ ทว่าผลทดลองทางวิทยาศาสตร์บ่งบอกให้รู้ว่าอาหารจากครัวไทยช่วยรักษาโรคได้จริง ผลการวิจัยของมหาวิทยาลัยเกียวโต แสดงให้เห็นว่า กว่าร้อยละ 75 ของสมุนไพรในอาหารไทยที่มีกว่า 40 ชนิด ช่วยรักษาเนื้องอกได้จริง โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งสมุนไพรจากตระกูลขิงและขมิ้น นักวิจัยได้สรุปไว้ว่าหากรับประทานผักและสมุนไพรจำเพาะชนิดเป็นประจำทุกวัน จะช่วยป้องกันโรคมะเร็งได้อย่างแน่นอน นอกจากนี้ งานวิจัยร่วมระหว่างนักวิทยาศาสตร์ไทยและญี่ปุ่นยังพบว่า ข่า ตะไคร้ และใบมะกรูด ในอาหารจำพวกแกงตำยาของไทย สร้างประสิทธิภาพร่วมกันในการป้องกันโรคมะเร็งได้


fighting properties. "Daily ingestion of some vegetables and fruits could undoubtedly contribute to cancer prevention," researchers concluded.

A subsequent study conducted jointly by Thai and Japanese scientists found that Thailand's famous tom yam soup contains key ingredients – galangal, lemongrass and kaffir lime – that interact in ways to promote their cancer-fighting abilities.

Back to the Kelabit Highlands of Malaysian Borneo: my host, Walter Paran, is a hunk of muscular health (aside from a stubbed toe). He keeps a machete on his hip and spends his days in the jungle, providing almost everything his family needs. He leads me into his dim little wood-fired kitchen, where his mother prepares wild meat, greens, flowers and mushrooms found in the forests surrounding their home.

Walter apologises needlessly for the simplicity of his life – and meals. Yet he also tells me his kin rarely get sick. There is no medicine man in his village. Most remedies come from the land. Only on rare occasion must a villager travel a muddy forest trail three hours to the nearest spit of a town, where an hour-long flight leads to the closest city with modern medical facilities.

Walter prefers to stay closer to home, where sustenance grows around him. "Everything we have is from here," he says. "We plant, or it's from the jungle." □



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Lime; cilantro; chives; basil; mint;
lemongrass

INGREDIENTS TO BETTER HEALTH

The following are numerous ingredients routinely used in Asian cooking. Each offers substantial health benefits.

BASIL: contains antibacterial properties and is recommended for use in washing produce or as an addition to uncooked salads. It helps prevent cell damage from free radicals and acts as an anti-inflammatory.

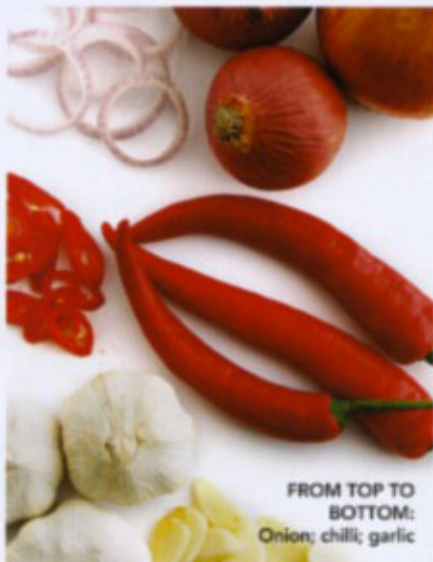
CHILLI: lab tests show capsaicin, the active component of chilli peppers, can kill cancer cells; as such it's being studied as a possible cancer drug ingredient. Capsaicin can also relieve muscle strain and psoriasis, and is shown to help control pain, the clearing of nasal passages and the prevention of free-radical damage that can lead to colon cancer and heart disease. It can boost immunity, fight infections and help prevent ulcers.

CILANTRO: helps rid the body of mercury and other metals. Contains antibacterial properties that might naturally fight food poisoning, including salmonella (these properties are also found in cilantro seeds, known as coriander).

CINNAMON: helps lower blood sugar, fights the effects of diabetes and lowers cholesterol. It also contains antimicrobial qualities.

CLOVES: help improve insulin function and cardiovascular health and reduce cholesterol and glucose levels. They're highly beneficial to people with diabetes.

COCONUT: Pacific Islanders consider coconut a cure-all, calling it the 'Tree of Life'. It's used to treat abscesses, asthma, bronchitis, burns, colds, constipation, fever, flu, tuberculosis, tumours and dozens of other conditions. Modern studies suggest coconut kills viruses, bacteria and fungi, improves digestion, helps pancreatitis, relieves ulcers,



reduces inflammation and helps to protect against breast, colon and other cancers.

GALANGAL: a cousin to ginger with similar anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. A British study shows the root has the ability to kill cancer cells as well as improving the ability of healthy cells to protect themselves from carcinogens. It's traditionally used in Asia to fight stomach cancer.

GARLIC: perhaps the mother of all medicinal foods. According to Sanskrit records, it's been taken medicinally for at least 5,000 years. Historically, it's been used for hypertension, infections, snakebites, reducing cholesterol and a host of other conditions.

GINGER: another ancient wonder, used for thousands of years to treat upset stomachs, nausea, diarrhoea, digestive problems, common colds, headaches and menstrual cramps. In modern times, it is used to treat motion sickness, arthritis, pregnancy sickness and chemotherapy nausea. Early studies show possible links to decreased cholesterol, blood clotting and risk of cancer.

LEMONGRASS: helps induce sleep, fights headache and anxiety. Aids digestion, fights

cramps, reduces stress. Used topically as an antifungal and antiseptic and natural mosquito repellent.

MINT: good for digestion, fights nausea and headaches, opens blocked airways, relieves symptoms of asthma and an effective skin cleanser. Preliminary lab tests have linked some mints to cancer-fighting benefits.

ONIONS: contain antibacterial and antifungal properties. Used for skin problems. Like garlic, they are members of the allium genus, many of whose plants contain strong odiferous elements that act as the plant's natural defence mechanisms – as well as benefits to human health. Good for the heart and reducing the risk of cancer.

PAPAYA: boosts cardiovascular health, protects against colon cancer and heart disease, lowers cholesterol. Contains enzymes shown to reduce inflammation and helps heal burns. Promotes lung health and reduces the effects of asthma and arthritis. Helps protect against macular degeneration and rheumatoid arthritis. One study shows a diet containing papaya and green tea reduces the risk of prostate cancer.

TEA: loaded with antioxidants in all forms. Early evidence suggests tea – black, green, white or oolong – can reduce risk of heart attack, protect against colon cancer, reduce inflammation and arthritis, and aid memory.

TURMERIC: a key ingredient in ancient Chinese and Indian cuisines. Used to treat inflammation, its main component, curcumin, is marketed in the West as a supplement to treat arthritis. Possible use against asthma, multiple sclerosis and inflammatory bowel disease. Study shows it can help prevent bone loss. Other possible benefits: fighting cancers and healing cancerous lesions; improving psoriasis; and improving brain function.