

Strictly for the girls

Chinese cuisine has certain foods that work well for women and their special needs

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Throughout history, women have always played important if quiet roles in Chinese families and society. In modern day China, it has finally been recognized that “women hold up half the sky”; to quote Chairman Mao Zedong.

To be able to do their part in this herculean task, women have to balance career and family. As they juggle childbirth and looking after children with full-time jobs, they need good nutrition more than ever, and in this aspect, Chinese cuisine has always taken care of the fairer sex.

Food is medicine, medicine is food, and it is all about yin and yang.

There are certain foods that work especially well for women, whose constitutions are considered weaker, especially when it comes time for their monthly cycles. They are also prone to cold hands and feet, an indication of poor circulation.

Young women are too conscious of being overweight, and in their attempts to shed the extra pounds, they may neglect basic nutrition needs.

As for that physically traumatic time each month, the Chinese believe that lighter-flavored, non-spicy food will nourish the body, such as tonic soups with red meats and lots of vegetables. Vegetables must be cooked and not eaten raw during the menstrual period, because raw food is too “cooling”.

Foods rich in iron and protein like wolfberry leaves with liver, lotus roots with lean pork, spinach or amaranth with fish and tofu are encouraged. They should also be cooked in less oil, and with minimum aromatics such as garlic and onions to keep the palate light.

Many mothers

will feed their daughters ginger, a herb that warms the body and chases away the chills. A popular infusion is a sweet soup made with raw brown sugar, dried Chinese jujubes and slices of ginger, prescribed to relieve stomach cramps.

After the period is over, it is time to catch up on nutrition. Silky or black chicken soup with dried angelica root or American ginseng is good for a body recovering from lost nutrients.

Angelica root, or *danggui*, is generally recognized as a “women’s herb”, as is motherwort, or *yimucao*.

But it is just after a woman gives birth that she really needs special care. In Chinese culture, the month after is the crucial time. It is called the confinement month, because she is

generally at home getting to know her baby, and her body is trying to recover.

Mothers and mothers-in-law will get busy cooking for her with a battalion of the family’s best traditional recipes. Sometimes, a special confinement nurse is employed to cook and look after both mother and child.

There are different recipes in every family and every region, but they all have the same purpose — to help the new mother recuperate from childbirth.

Sometimes, folk wisdom is amazingly accurate in identifying her needs.

A popular confinement dish is pig trotters slow-braised in sweet black vinegar with an incredible amount of ginger. The trotters are cooked down to a tenderness that allows them to be easily digested. The fat is emulsified in the vinegar from the long cooking, and the vinegar also dissolves some of the calcium from the trotter bones.

Tastewise, it is spicy, sweet and sour and excellent for whetting the appetite. In addition, the ginger in the stew stimulates circulation and chases away flatulence.

This dish is believed to be so good for the mother in confinement that a pot is kept simmering on the stove throughout, and replen-



Snow Fungus Beauty Tonic with lily bulbs, snow fungus and dried red jujubes.

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Recipe

Snow Fungus Beauty Tonic

(Lily bulbs, snow fungus and dried red jujubes)

- 1 large piece of snow fungus (*xue'er*), soaked. About 30-40g
- 50g dried lily bulbs (*baihe*)
- 6-8 dried jujubes, or Chinese red dates (*hongzao*)
- 1 slice ginger
- 100g rock sugar

Thoroughly soak the snow fungus until it is very soft. Trim off the hard yellow bits at the base and then break it into smaller pieces.

Soak the lily bulbs and trim off any blackened sections. Remove the seeds from the jujubes. This is crucial as traditional Chinese medicine believes the seeds cause too much accumulated heat in the body.

Put 2 liters of water to the boil and add the snow fungus, lily bulbs and jujubes, with the piece of ginger. Let it come back to a boil before reducing to a simmer. Cook until the fungus has almost melted and become jelly-like.

Add the rock sugar and stir. Serve hot, or chilled.

Ginger-for-the-tummy Tea

(This is an excellent and comforting cure for when the menstrual cramps hit)

- One large piece of ginger
- 6 dried jujubes or Chinese red dates
- Brown or raw sugar to taste

Wash and scrub the ginger, then flatten it with the side of a knife. Remove the seeds from the dried jujubes.

Place ginger and jujubes in a liter of water. Bring to a boil and sweeten with plenty of brown sugar. The longer you boil, the more gingery it will get. Drink piping hot.

ished with a constant supply of trotters, vinegar and ginger.

Another dish is chicken cooked in sesame oil and rice wine, and more ginger. The old wives believe that sesame is one of the purest oils and the healthiest. It will also keep the mother regular, since constipation is a common post-natal complaint.

Ginger and chicken are part of the nutrition package.

Pig liver is also flash-fried in more sesame oil to boost the iron intake. As a variation, liver is minced and hot water is poured on it to create an instant tonic soup. Of course, slivered ginger must be added as well.

The lactating mother is fed lots of fish soup to encourage the flow of milk, and in certain parts of China, a peanut and trotter soup serves the same purpose.

Generally, recipes to boost health and beauty could fill a whole library of cookbooks. Rightly so, for mothers and daughters certainly hold up more than their share of sky.

