

Galangal

by Ingrid Naiman

Just had your first taste of Tom Kha Gai and your senses are still reeling from the exotic citrus flavor of something that clearly was not a fruit? Did you bite into something so exciting and pleasant that you thought about forgetting the main course and simply ordering more soup? The “kha” in that soup is a fantastic member of the ginger family called galanga or galangal. It is native to Southern China and Thailand but was introduced to Europe in the 9th century, almost 500 years before Marco Polo.

Galangal changed my world view, and to it I owe more than a thousand culinary delights as well as excellent digestion. Also, thanks to galangal, my mind became unfettered by the history I learned in school; and I was moved to rebuild my intellectual world as well as my herbal pharmacy.

History

Imagine zealous, sword brandishing Christian knights left for dead on battlefields of the Holy Land depending on Jewish and Islamic doctors to heal them. Many of these knights spent years in the foment of spiritual and academic conflict, only to return transformed by the world from whence the Sun rose.

The Middle East is appropriately named “middle” because it has been a crossroads for eons, a place where prophets and physicians meandered among camels and caravans hearing the tales of those whose journeys originated in yet unknown parts of the world.

Why galangal? Well, my love relationship with this delicious and fascinating herb was part three of my romance with the ginger family, an affair that began in Hawaii with turmeric and moved to ginger and finally its close cousin, galangal, the culinary crown of these beautiful tropical plants.

St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was one of the foremost herbal authorities of her day. I had researched her formulas for my book on botanical cancer treatments and discovered, much to my amazement, that galangal was so highly revered by her that she actually wrote that it had been given by God to provide protection against illness. “The spice of life,” as she called galangal, appears in many Hildegard formulas.

For instance, Hildegard had a formula for deafness due to catarrh or infection in which galangal, called “catarrh root,” was the cornerstone. She said to take galangal and one-third as much aloe powder as galangal plus twice as much oregano as aloe and some peach leaves. These were mixed into a powder and taken daily as digestive aids, both on an empty stomach as well as a few pinches with the last bite of each meal.

For Hildegard, this remedy was not just a little formula for deafness, but a major focus of intent because Hildegard was, in addition, to her herbal erudition an accomplished musician, not just a composer, but a visionary who understood the profound relationship of hearing to health.

In Hildegard's medicine, the powerful adjudicators of fate, the determinants of happiness or misfortune as well as health or sickness, depend on hearing. She felt that metabolism is affected by the liver which, in turn, has a direct relationship to the ears and hearing. Harsh sounds can disturb bodily fluids, and fluids that contact blood vessels impact hearing when they reach the ears. Hildegard believed that health is earned or forfeited partly as a consequence of what we hear. To offset the shock to the liver of sounds that undermine health, Hildegard composed scores of chants and a musical drama called "Ordo Virtutum," and, as we see, she also prescribed this interesting galangal formula as a digestive aid.

Galangal was also the principle herb of Hildegard's three-week cure for heart problems. She had a pill, a juice, and a powder for heart pain. The pills were to be taken three times a day, after meals during the first week and between meals for the next two weeks. The pills consisted of equal parts of galangal and pellitory, a perennial herb that is native to the Mediterranean as far east as the Middle East, and a quarter as much white pepper. These were to be mixed with a meal made from fava beans. It was moistened with fenugreek juice or wine. These pills reduce heart pain.

The second part of her remedy relied on licorice and fennel seeds, one part licorice to five parts fennel and five parts sugar and a little honey. These were mixed with water. The powder used white pepper, one-third as much cumin and fenugreek as pepper. These were powdered and put on bread. These remedies were used to reduce pain and the fear that, in her estimation, brings on heart attacks.

Hildegard regarded galangal mainly as a potent aid to digestion and quick reliever of pain, such as the pain associated with angina pectoris, heart attacks, and gall bladder symptoms. The heart symptoms are secondary to the gastric distress, which, if relieved, eases cardiac pressure. Physicians in Germany who have taken up Hildegard Medicine as their calling have reported that galangal is as effective as nitroglycerin, but it has absolutely no harmful side effects. These same researchers point out that Hildegard, with her mystical vision, was the first and thus far the only herbalist to note the effect of galangal as a heart pain reliever:

Whoever has heart pain and is weak in the heart should instantly eat enough galangal, and he or she will be well again.

Physica

According to contemporary herbal sources, galangal is a warming, digestive tonic with a stimulating and carminative effect on digestion. Simply stated, it promotes the secretion of gastric juices, aids peristalsis, and relieves gas in the gastrointestinal tract. Anyone who has tasted galangal knows this to be true; they may even recognize that it dispels those disturbing gases that make one want to heave after a heavy meal. What is less well known is that these very same gases, by-products of fermentation when digestive action is not strong enough to metabolize an entire meal, circulate throughout the system causing spasms, everything from hiccups to sharp cardiac pains. What carminative spices do is neutralize the gases so that they cease to exist! By doing this, the many symptoms of the invisible but gusty winds subside.

On a psychological level, the predominant symptom of wind or air is anxiety, what I refer to as “groundless fears,” worries based on “nothing.” When someone’s system is overexcited by excess air, the person finds it harder to focus. As concentration is impaired, people tend to make careless mistakes. They “lose their centers” and begin running on nervous energy, which, of course, causes a lot of wear and tear on the body as well as psyche. For instance, in rushing into a car to get somewhere in a hurry, one may get halfway down the block only to ask whether the front door was locked on the way out. Odds favor that one locked the door because this is something one does on auto pilot; but with excess air, one ceases to be sure.

The question is whether to go home and check the front door and risk being even later to one’s next appointment or to go where one is going and worry all day about the front door. What is so intriguing about carminative herbs is that these psychosomatic symptoms that seem to have no basis in physiology subside when wind relieving foods and spices are used. In all my carminative formulas, galangal plays a key role. I have it in my teas and intestinal formulas because, like Hildegard, I have found it to be without equal. I even put galangal in some of the medicinal jams that I make.

Like most spices, galangal promotes digestion, assimilation, and elimination. According to Ayurveda, my own particular area of intense study, food that is not metabolized forms a substance called “ama” in Sanskrit, probably a term very close in meaning to Hildegard’s catarrh. Ama is a sticky substance, a metabolic residual that forms when the anabolic and catabolic processes are not in perfect balance.

When people have low metabolisms, their output of saliva and gastric juices as well as insulin and enzymes is insufficient to complete digestion of an ordinary meal. In such instances, some food is broken down by fermentation instead of digestion. This fermentation causes a host of abdominal rumblings as well as distention and other miseries. Heartburn comes after the bloating and discomfort.

Galangal is the herb of choice in relieving both the short- and long-term consequences both of sluggish metabolism and overeating, a holiday risk. Personally, I prefer, as the Thais do, to cook my food with spices so that the food itself is easier to digest, but digestive and carminative herbs can also be taken as supplements or post-digestive tonics, sort of like an after dinner aperitif. A chocolate covered mint is hardly comparable to galangal!

Today, galangal is available in the frozen food section in Asian food stores, as a powder in the spice department, and as a cut and sifted herb from bulk herb suppliers. This is the form I use in my teas. It is tangier than the powder. It has an incredible aroma of its own but combines well with other carminative spices such as star anise, cardamom, cinnamon, ginger, and pepper. These spices can be added to a pot of one’s favorite tea, making a “masala chai” or, for those inclined, they greatly enhance another traditional winter favorite, hot buttered rum!

Hildegard used a system of medicine not unlike my own, but I suspect it was traditional and taught in such places as Salerno and Padua a thousand years ago. In this system, the perils of wind, fear and pain, are offset by the virtues of warmth, which, in turn, impart courage. But one does not have to be brave to enjoy galangal: so delicious is galangal that Hildegard used galangal powder in warm wine as a reward after more assertive treatments for the serious pains of rheumatism, arthritis, lumbago, and sciatica.

Galangal also holds a place of honor in today's scientific world. Besides aiding digestion and relieving gastric distress, it is useful in alleviating the dizziness and nausea associated with morning sickness as well as motion sickness. Its antifungal and antibacterial properties have been found effective in treatment of candida albicans and even the anthrax pathogen.*

As a culinary spice, there is virtually no such thing as an overdose. One can use galangal to enhance the flavor or digestibility of breakfast cereals, casseroles, curry dishes, and even desserts such as puddings and ice cream. As a medicine, galangal can be taken in pills or capsules as well as powders. Since galangal is a food spice, there are no cumulative side effects or contraindications for its daily use by those who enjoy the taste or need the extra support for digestion. Elderly people in particular will generally find that galangal promotes a sense of clarity and well being that is often increasingly hard to maintain. People with poor circulation whose complaints increase in the winter will also find galangal useful in improving blood circulation to the hands and feet . . . and not to forget the ears, a place where clogging is a source of both social embarrassment and aesthetic loss. Galangal will gently and gradually remove the deposits that obstruct both circulation and the glory of the symphonic harmony we enjoy so much and upon which we depend, according to Hildegard, for our health.

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* **Warning:** this article was written years before the threat of bio-terrorism fear moved from a dreaded possibility to an actuality. At the time it was written, there was no thought that bio-terrorism would ever become a reality. The article was written for a magazine that specialized in articles about famous restaurants, and it was written for entertainment purposes. I am sorry that I did not re-read the article after the first cases of inhalation anthrax were discussed by experts in bioterrorism because there is no reason to believe that militarized anthrax and naturally occurring anthrax that is ingested are the same thing. To the best of my understanding, weaponized anthrax is coated in such a way as to make it much less susceptible to traditional treatments that were developed for naturally occurring anthrax, a disease that affects animals as well as people and that is more typically ingested than inhaled though it may also enter through a skin lesion. Our tea is mainly a digestive tea and Indigo Drops is a general immune enhancing formula.