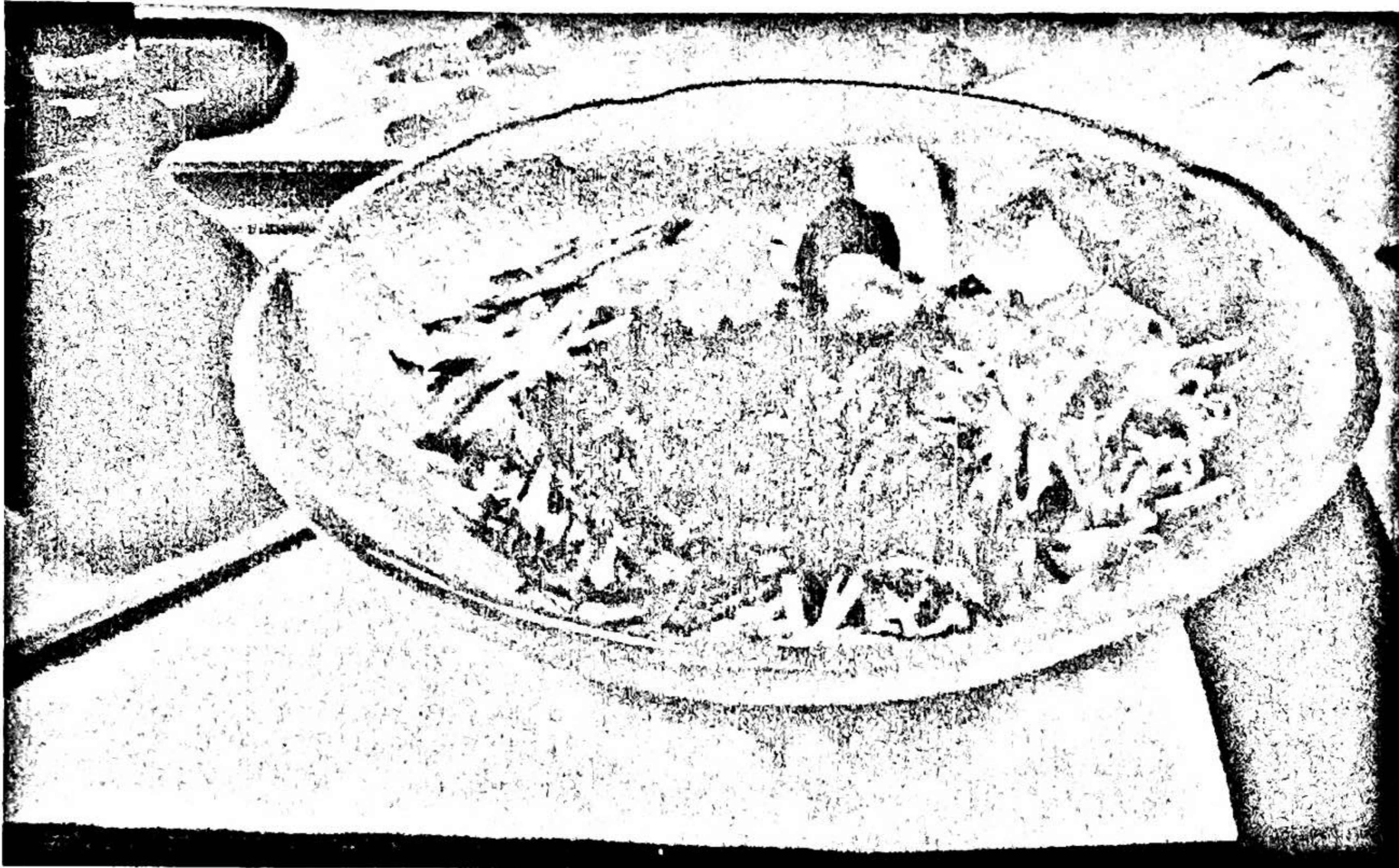


Food Energetic Systems



Courtesy of Maria Napoli

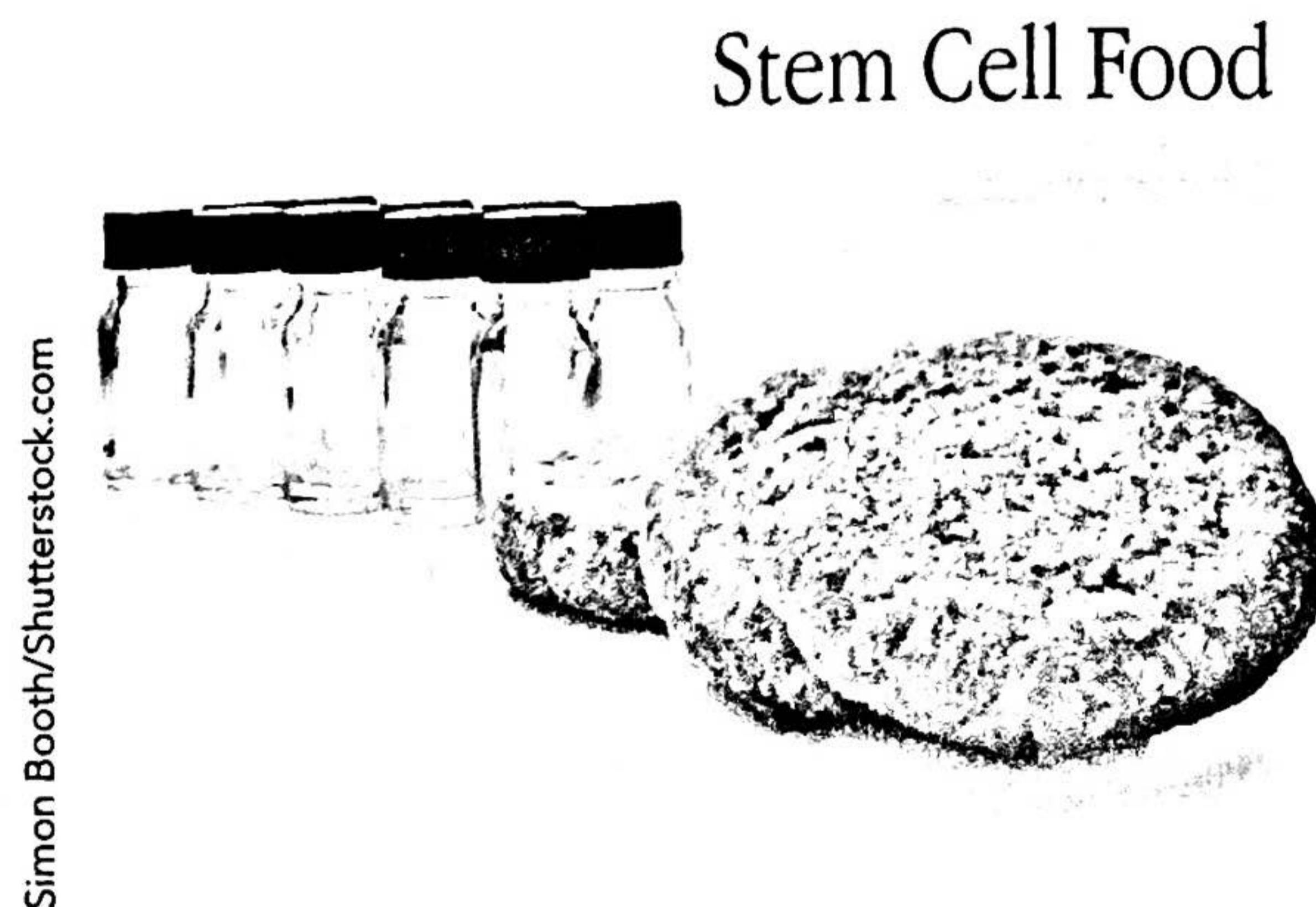
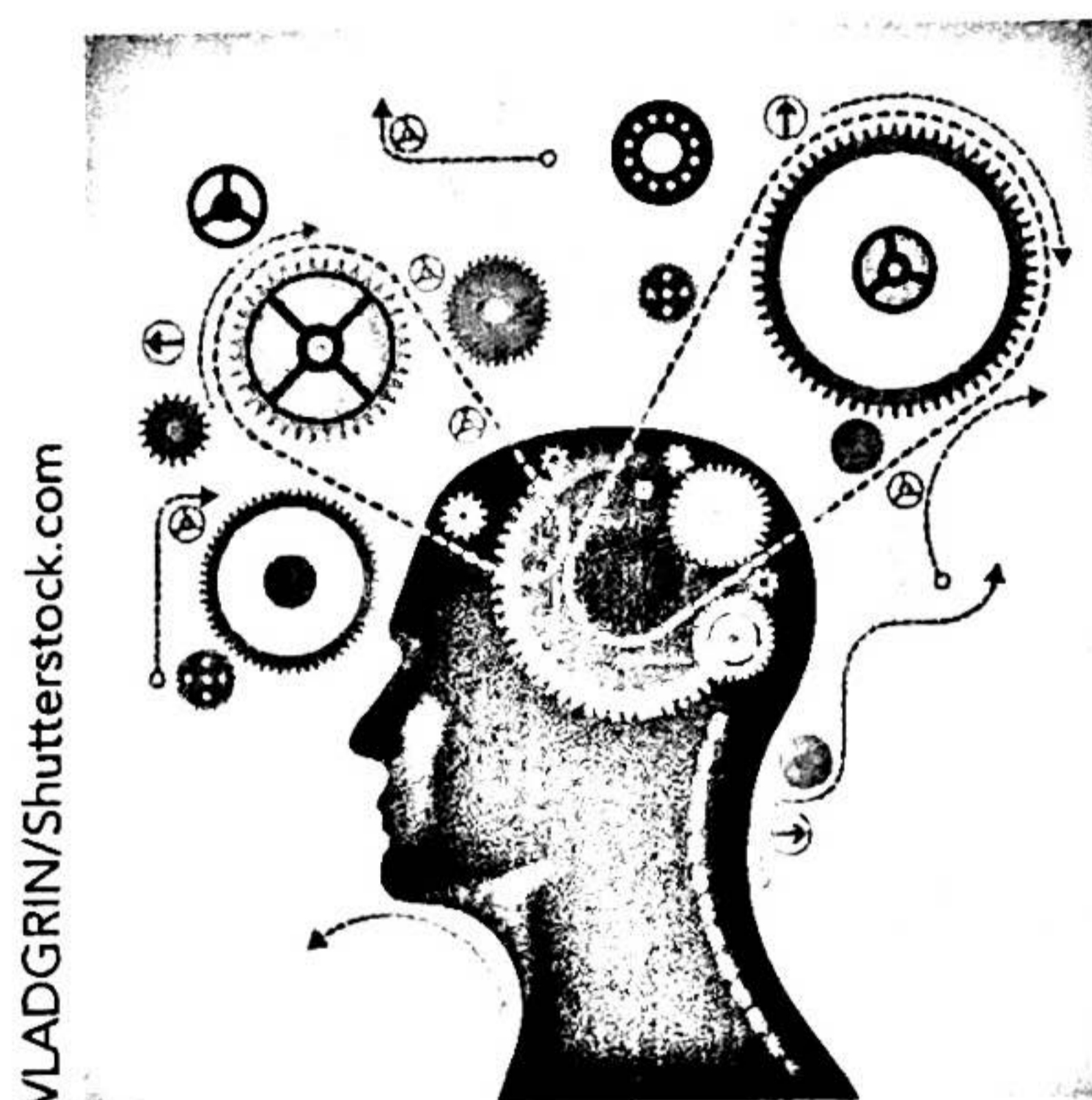
*I choose food that is alive
With nourishment
Cells bursting with energy
I am in balance
Mindful of satisfying my body
(Napoli)*

Food is energy. Learning how to use its effects to support health is an age-old practice (1). From the origins of mankind, hunter-gatherers learned about local plants, and knew which were edible and how to use others in medicinal ways. This type of knowledge of plants and their energetic and medicinal properties formed the basis of Western herbal traditions and traditional Asian medical systems (2). The way we think about food now is very different! We seldom think of food as anything other than containing certain amounts of protein, carbohydrate, fat, minerals, and vitamins. We break apart food in laboratories, analyzing the separate ingredients in an attempt to understand how food helps or harms. Thinking about the nutritional value of food, we “sum total” all of its chemical ingredients before they enter the body.

MAN AS MACHINE

Viewing food in this fashion is defined as “mechanistic” (3). This understanding of food is based on Western scientific beliefs that suggest if we can break down food to its fundamental components we can recreate food out of its basic building blocks. Then, food becomes something that can be made in a laboratory. Synthetically made food is part of our diets whenever we eat processed foods, which are packaged and enhanced with chemicals and flavorings for taste, appearance, shelf life, and efficiency reasons. In response to the negative environmental impact of factory farmed beef, which you’ll read more about in Chapter 7, scientists are concocting ways to create beef from the stem cells of cows (4).

This Western view, based on chemistry, may contribute to what nutritionists call food disconnection (5). We eat “food-like” substances, purchased from supermarkets, with no knowledge of where or how it was grown.



If we think instead that food is medicine, and its energy is both nourishing and healing, it fundamentally changes our relationship to nourishment in ways that promote health. How is food a powerful medicine? It is energy and information. Every molecule in our bodies is created from the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe, we literally are what we eat. In choosing to eat whole fresh foods, foods in their natural unrefined forms, we ensure that we consume all of the nutritional needs our bodies require while creating a sense of balance and health. This is because whole grains, beans, nuts, seeds, vegetables, and fruits provide thousands of important phytochemicals that work with our bodies to build and maintain optimal health (6). Beyond the nutritional benefits of a whole-food diet, the energetic properties of food contribute to our well-being and absence of disease. Let’s look at two ancient systems of food as medicine with fundamental philosophies of food energetics to better understand the potential benefits from connecting to our food.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: ANCIENT PRESCRIPTION WITH MODERN BENEFITS

In Chinese medicine, food is seen through the lens of five energies, their capacity to generate sensations of either hot or cold in the human body. The five energy types are cold, hot, warm, cool, and neutral, which refers not only to the state of the food but also its effect on the body (7). Hot tea is one example. Its cool energy means that when we drink hot tea, it generates coolness. In Chinese medicine this means it is a cool beverage. Shortly after drinking hot tea, heat fades quickly and begins to generate cool energy internally, which allows the body to cool off.

In addition to the five energies, Chinese medicine views a balanced diet with the appropriate balance of yin and yang. Yin foods have energetic properties of darkness, slower moving, and colder. Yang foods are the opposite—hotter, faster, and much more energetic. Yin foods are cool and cold; yang foods are hot and warm; and balanced yin and yang are neutral. Here are some examples of different foods and their energies:

	Energy Generated	Examples
Yin	Cold	Tomato, watermelon, banana, grapefruit, seaweed, kelp, sprouts, lettuces, salt, soy sauce
Yin	Cool	Millet, barley, wheat, buckwheat, eggplant, cucumber, celery, peppermint, broccoli, spinach, apple, egg whites, sesame oil, cream, yogurt and cheese
Balanced yin and yang	Neutral	Rice, corn, sweet potato, carrot, cabbage, black sesame, sunflower seed, plums, grapes, lemon, mushrooms, shrimp, pork, beef, egg yolk, honey, milk, soymilk, sugar
Yang	Warm	Onion, leeks, green onion, sweet peppers, spearmint, peach, raspberry, pumpkin, walnut, seafood, garlic, ginger, nutmeg, rosemary, coffee, wine, vegetable oil, chicken, ham, goat milk, brown sugar
Yang	Hot	Black pepper, cinnamon, chili pepper, mustard seed

In addition to the energetic qualities attributed to foods by Chinese medicine practitioners, there are five predominant tastes: pungent, sweet, sour, bitter, and salty. Each taste corresponds with a different organ system, and a balanced approach to diet is important to fully support the entire body. For example, pungent tastes are believed to support the lungs and the large intestines, and sweet tastes support the stomach and the spleen. The Chinese believe both flavor and the energetics of yin and yang must both be considered in order to fully support health, or recovery from illness.

What then is the Chinese medicine prescription for nutritional health? To maintain health, one must consume the right balance of yin, yang, and neutral foods. In the Eastern traditions, herbs are considered food and help support the digestive processes of the body (8). Herbs can help to balance the qualities of yin and yang present in all foods. Each food has a combination of yin and yang elements that are complimentary, existing in food in a dynamic way that balances its energetic properties. Using herbs in ways that supplement the underlying energetic properties of foods can be a helpful adjunct therapy that leads to a balanced energetic approach to the foods we consume.

AYURVEDA: A RECIPE FOR HEALTHY LIVING

Ayurveda (pronounced i-yer-vay-da) is an ancient system of holistic healthcare that is becoming increasingly popular in the West today. Ayurvedic medicine focuses on all areas of health, including diet, lifestyle, exercise, detoxification, sleep, and the mind.

A sister science to Yoga, Ayurveda emerged from the sacred texts of ancient India, known as the *Vedas*, or “Books of Wisdom.” These date back at least 5,000 years and are widely regarded as humanity’s oldest literature (9). As a completely universal body of wisdom, Ayurvedic practices are as relevant today as they were 5,000 years ago. Ayurvedic principles can be woven into any culture or time period, because they are rooted in the laws and cycles of Mother Nature.

According to Ayurveda, health is not a *state* defined by lab tests or yearly check-ups. Health is a continuous and participatory *process* that embraces all aspects of life: physical, mental, emotional, behavioral, spiritual, familial, social, and universal. Achieving balance on all levels of being is the true measure of vibrant health. The average person and standardized treatment simply do not exist in Ayurvedic medicine. Every individual is a one-of-a-kind with an equally unique blueprint for health. By providing a universal framework for understanding these blueprints, Ayurveda teaches us to honor and support our true individual natures.

The underlying prescription of Ayurvedic medicine is quite simple: recognize the power of self-healing within, and you will become your own greatest doctor (10).

In the Ayurvedic system, the individual mind–body or psychophysiological constitution is called one’s *dosha* (11). The tridosha system offers a simple and complete way to understand how the foods we eat affect our body’s energies.

Ayurveda is literally the “science of life”, or of longevity. Nearly 3,000 years ago, Ayurvedic practitioners approached health and healing as a practice that balanced the five basic elements of the cosmos: earth, air, fire, water, and space. In human beings, these five elements occur in the form of the three *doshas*, forces that along with the seven (*dhatu*s) tissues and three *malas* (waste products) make up the human body.

The Three Doshas. When in balance, the three doshas maintain health, and when an imbalance occurs among them, they cause the normal functioning of the body to go out of balance leading to disease. Imbalances indicate an increase or decrease in one, two, or all three of the doshas. The three doshas are *vata* (air), *pitta* (fire), and *kapha* (water/earth). According to the Ayurvedic system, we each have all three doshas present, with one most dominant. When out of balance, we can suffer from disturbance; meaning one or more of the doshas is out of balance. *Vata* dosha is made up of the elements of air and space. It is viewed energetically as kinetic energy, and is responsible for all body movement and nervous functions. *Vata* is found below the navel and in the organs below, as well as the nervous system, pelvic region, thighs, and legs. Its disruption is manifested as gas and muscular or nervous energy, leading to pain.

Pitta is made up of the element of fire. It governs all enzymes in the body and hormones and is responsible for digestion, pigmentation, body temperature, hunger, thirst, sight, courage, and mental activity. *Pitta* is located between the navel and the chest (going upward from the navel, where *vata* is downward), it is in the stomach, small intestines, liver, spleen, skin, and blood; its principal “seat” is in the stomach. When disrupted, or disturbed, its manifestation is acid, which leads to inflammation.

Kapha is made up of the elements of earth and water. It represents the principle of stability and cohesion. *Kapha*’s job is to regulate *pitta* and *vata* energies, and is responsible for keeping the body lubricated and maintaining its solid nature and strength, as well as vitality. It is located in the upper part of the body and the upper portion of the stomach, fat tissues, and areas between joints; its principal seat is in the lungs. When disrupted, *kapha* disturbance manifests as mucus and liquid leading to swelling.

Vata’s qualities are dryness, cold, light, irregularity, mobility, roughness, and abundance. These qualities emerge in contrast to the attributes of *vata*. For example, the *vata* energetic attribute of motion can lead to the side effect of dryness. Too much dryness produces irregularity of body and mind. *Pitta* is hot, light, intense, fluid, liquid, putrid, pungent, and sour. Heat appears when *pitta* is disturbed and results from change caused by *pitta*. The intensity of excessive heat produces irritability in the body

and mind. Kapha is heavy, cold, stable, dense, soft, and smooth. When disturbed, heaviness occurs and results from firmness caused by kapha. This produces slowness in the body and mind.

All diseases or ills are viewed as disruptions in the balance of the three doshas. The seven "normal" doshic body constitutions are vata, pitta, kapha, vata-pitta, pitta-kapha, vata-kapha, and sama. Sama is triple balanced, and is extremely rare. Most of us are a combination of doshas with one type predominant. In general, vata type people are light and "airy" with energetic imbalances that include anxiety and fearfulness. Pitta types, with their fiery qualities, are aggressive and impatient, exhibiting fiery and hot-headed characteristics, and are prone to pitta type diseases. Kapha types are stable and entrenched, solid, and dependable; they exhibit heavy, wet, and earthy characteristics, and are prone to kapha diseases.

Rasa (Taste by the Tongue)	Element	Doshic Effect
Sweet	Earth and water	kapha, pitta, & vata
Sour	Earth and fire	kapha & pitta, vata
Saline	Water and fire	kapha & pitta, vata
Pungent	Wind and fire	pitta & vata, kapha
Bitter	Wind and space	vata, pitta & kapha
Astringent	Wind and earth	vata, kapha & pitta

Herbal medicine and the kitchen treat disease in the Ayurvedic system. Foods and drugs are classified by the tongue, potency, and taste after digestion.

Here is a quiz to help you determine what dosha you are. If you were to see an Ayurvedic physician you would most likely begin your visit by taking a quiz just like this one.

Dosha Quiz: What Type Are You?

Take the following quiz to determine your dosha type. Circle the best answer.

Body Structure			
	Vata	Pitta	Kapha
Face	Oblong or narrow	Angular with strong features	Round with soft features
Eyes	Small	Deep set, medium	Large
Nose Bridge	Narrow width to the bridge	Medium width to the bridge	Wider and flatter
Lips	Thin	Medium	Full
Complexion	Lack luster or a dusty gray	Rosy, ruddy	Pale
Hair	Coarse fibers but scanty and dry	Fine fiber, oily, may experience early gray	Coarse fibers, oily, and quite full or dense

sweet in flavor, try throwing them into your desserts. This is already the case in some Asian countries, where mung bean paste is used to make frozen desserts.

In Ayurveda, mung beans are considered extremely easy to digest and are considered purifying and cleansing. Mung beans pack a nice nutritional punch—they are high in potassium, fiber, magnesium, and B vitamins, and they are also a good source of vitamin C. Try using these little beans in your own plant-based cooking. Enjoy this easy recipe and its wonderful combination of cleansing fresh herbs and purifying beans.



Marina Shanti/Shutterstock.com

Basil Mung Bean Salad (Author's Recipe)

Yield: Makes ~ 4 servings

Ingredients

- 1 cup mung beans, cooked according to directions on bag
- 5 cups diced or thinly sliced cabbage and carrots
- 1 large handful fresh basil (about a cup), coarsely chopped
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 avocado, sliced

To taste: sea salt

Directions

In a large skillet, heat the olive oil on medium low. Add the carrots and cabbage, and sauté about 3 minutes.

Add the mung beans, and continue to sauté, stirring occasionally, until the cabbage is translucent, about 5 minutes.

Add sea salt to taste.

Stir in the basil and saute another minute.

Take off the stove and add in the sliced avocado.

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