

Bitter Medicine

Mo Katz-Christy

To our bodies, the bitter flavor is like the impulse of a spring ephemeral flower to the forest floor. Bursting with potential and in love with impermanence it changes the seasons inside our body.

What are bitter herbs? Dandelion leaves. Bolted lettuce. Endive. Green, leafy plants -- the plants of our ancestors. We have bred bitterness out of our foods, but our bodies evolved to recognize the bitter flavor as a sign that a big meal was on its way.

When we taste something bitter, every digestive secretion in our body begins. Our salivary glands start to increase saliva production. Our stomach starts to secrete acid. Our liver starts to secrete bile, allowing us to digest our winter fats. Bitter regulates the rhythmic downward motion of our digestive tract.

Bitter has a downward flow, like a gurgling brook in spring, fed by snowmelt. In winter, snow coats the earth like the thick layer of schmaltz on a pot of chicken soup. Our bodies are sluggish, kept warm by these winter stews and days inside. In spring, bitter melts the snow and allows us to metabolize our winter inward reflection into motion, action, flow.

Then why is horseradish often used, especially on Ashkenazi seder plates, when it is acrid, not bitter, and a root, not an herb?



As some Jews migrated north, they found it harder to find bitter herbs at Peysakh. The first record of Jews using horseradish as the “bitter herb” on the seder plate is from the 14th century, just as the little ice age was starting and Northern Europe was especially frigid.

If bitter is a cool river fed by snowmelt, acrid is a hot spring. Horseradish turns up our fire. It stimulates and circulates almost every bodily fluid, from sweat, to blood, to lymph. For Jews learning to celebrate Peysakh on land where it was still very much winter, their bodies may have needed the fire of acrid more than the flow of bitters.

What flavors do we need in order to meet this moment? We evolve with our sacred plants, and they with us. They carry with them memories of our ancestors’ diaspora and are nourished by our bodies and the body of the soil we now call home.

