

FOOD *as* MEDICINE

— a growing body of evidence is telling us that we are what we eat

Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food - Hippocrates

by LIZ CAMPBELL



There's a whole new way to look at food. Nutraceuticals (often referred to as phytochemicals or functional foods) don't merely provide sustenance. Instead they are natural, bioactive chemical compounds that have health promoting, disease preventing or medicinal properties.

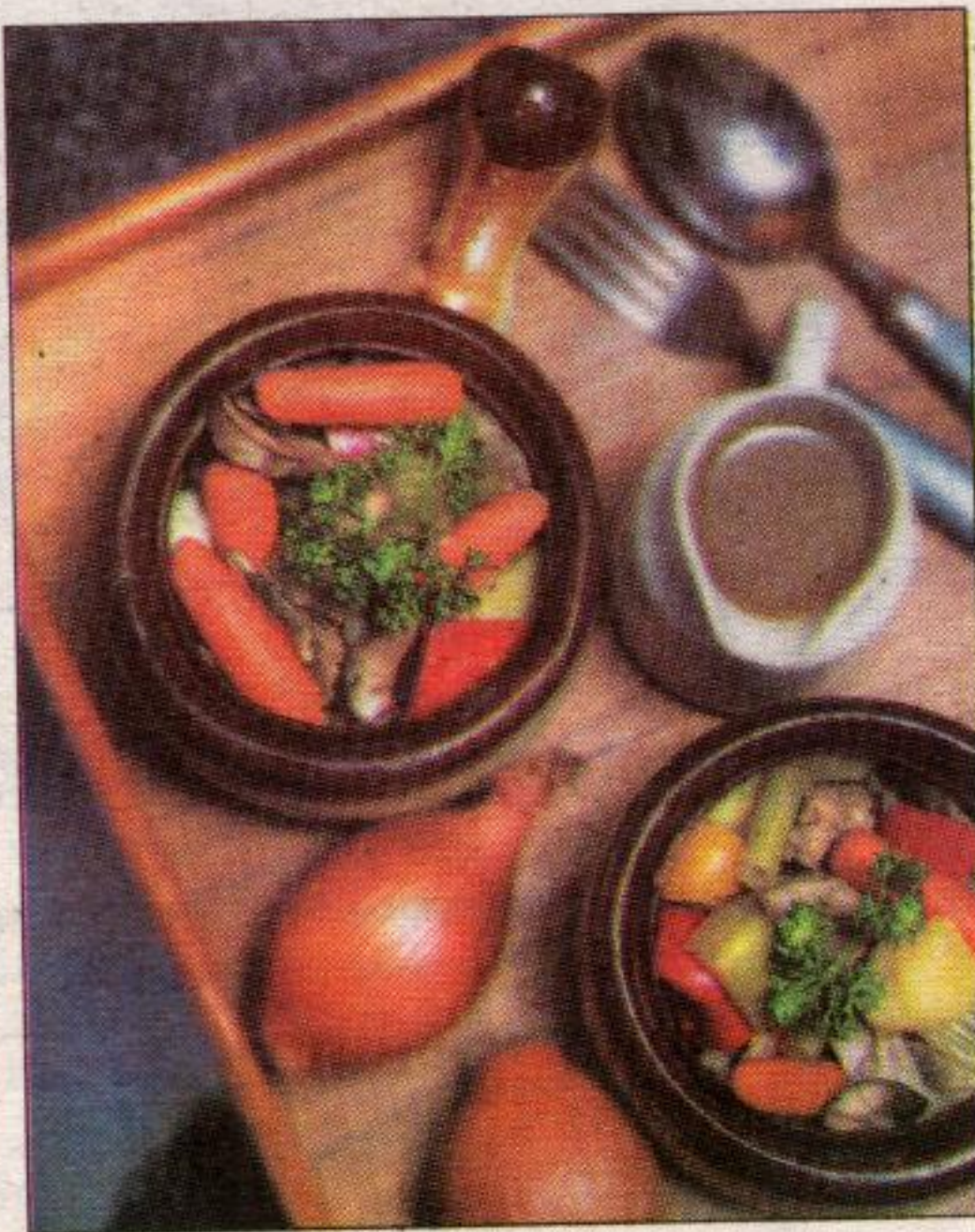
But maybe it's not such a new concept, after all. Hippocrates recognized the healthful benefits of foods. And, early sailors knew the value of lemons and limes in preventing scurvy — indeed it was their use of limes for this purpose that resulted in English sailors being called limeys. The ancient Greeks looked on garlic as a performance enhancing drug and officially sanctioned its use during the first Olympic Games. And cranberries have been used against urinary tract infections for centuries. All these are nutraceuticals.

Nutraceuticals, according to the American Nutraceutical Association, are functional foods with potentially disease-preventing and health-promoting properties. They also include naturally occurring dietary substances in pharmaceutical dosage forms. For example, isoflavones in soy are phytoestrogens with a chemical structure similar to the estrogen in our bodies.

Functional foods, as defined by the American Dietetic Association, are products whose nutritional value is enhanced by the addition of natural ingredients. These may provide specific health benefits beyond basic nutrition. A good example might be the addition of iodine to salt or Vitamin D to milk. However, the two terms are commonly used interchangeably. And whether you call them functional foods or nutraceuticals, they have become very important to informed consumers.



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In fact, says Susan Mah, a registered dietitian and spokesperson for Dietitians of Canada, "Functional foods, as they are called, are the hottest trend of the millennium." But she adds, "The best advice is to enjoy a varied diet according to Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating."

Here's a small cornucopia of foods whose consumption confers benefits beyond simply nutrition

- Anthocyanidins - a naturally occurring antioxidant found in berries - are linked to better health.

- Broccoli and its close relatives contain a range of healthful substances including indoles and isothiocyanates which may help fight against cancer. Sulforaphane in these vegetables has been shown to trigger the release of cancer-fighting enzymes in the body.

- Isoflavones in soy products seem to protect against osteoporosis and heart disease, according to preliminary research. Genistein, a component of soy, is associated with reduced risk of breast cancer

- Phytochemicals or "plant chemicals" which give produce their brilliant colour and flavour, also seem to offer protection against heart disease and some types of cancer.

- Fibre comes in two forms. Insoluble fibre found in wheat bran, for example, helps to keep bowels regular and healthy. Soluble fibre, found in oats and oatmeal, helps to lower blood cholesterol.

- Lycopene is found in canned and fresh tomatoes. This Vitamin A-like substance may help reduce the risk of heart disease and prostate cancer.

- Peanut butter and nuts, because of their high content of monounsaturated fat, have been linked with a lower risk of heart disease.

- Fish oils in canned salmon and sardines, as well as in fresh, fatty types of fish, seem to lower blood cholesterol and heart disease.

- Tannins and catechins in tea may play a role in reducing heart disease, stroke and some types of cancer.

- Yogurt with acidophilus, casei or bifidus bacterial cultures, may help improve intestinal

health. The calcium in yogurt is a bonus.

- Grapes are rich in flavonoids, powerful antioxidants that protect the heart. That at least partly explains why regular wine-drinkers run a lower risk of heart attacks. Researchers at the University of Wisconsin found that the antioxidants in purple grape juice are just as effective as aspirin in preventing artery-clogging blood clots.

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