

Food, Medicine, and the Quest for Good Health: Nutrition, Medicine, and Culture

By Nancy N. Chen

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What we eat, how we eat, where we eat, and when we eat are deeply embedded cultural practices. Eating is also related to how we medicate. The multimillion-dollar diet industry offers advice on how to eat for a better body and longer life, and avoiding harmful foods (or choosing healthy ones) is considered separate from consuming medicine—another multimillion-dollar industry. In contrast, most traditional medical systems view food as inseparable from medicine and regard medicinal foods as the front line of healing.

Drawing on medical texts and food therapy practices from around the world and throughout history, Nancy N. Chen locates old and new crossovers between food and medicine in different social and cultural contexts. The consumption of spices, sugar, and salt was once linked to specific healing properties, and trade in these commodities transformed not just the political economy of Europe, Asia, and the New World but local tastes and food practices as well. Today's technologies are rapidly changing traditional attitudes toward food, enabling the cultivation of new admixtures, such as nutraceuticals and genetically modified food, that link food to medicine in novel ways. Chen considers these developments against the evolving food regimes of the diet industry in order to build a framework for understanding diet as individual practice, social prescription, and political formation.

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #497354 in Books
- Published on: 2008-12-15
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.30" h x .70" w x 5.50" l, .70 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 144 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this slim volume, UC Santa Cruz anthropology professor Chen sums up key points of convergence between food and health throughout history. A brief overview of Chinese, Greek and Islamic approaches to health, the rise of vitamins and other supplements, reported benefits of foodstuffs like ginkgo and ginseng, and the role of spices will inform, though Chen's wide-angle focus doesn't allow for much elaboration or depth. A handful of recipes like Ginger Garlic Tea with Lime and Honey (a simple, restorative remedy for cold and flu sufferers) and Rice Porridge and Wolfberry Soup (said to nourish the kidneys and liver) help make Chen's point, but, again, they're too few and far between to satisfy. Those looking for a brief, high-level overview of food's impact on human health and the cultural attitudes pertaining will find this educational, but readers looking for real depth and insight will find Chen's work more an appetizer than a main dish.

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Review

Nancy N. Chen helps us understand how ideas about food, health, and the body are entwined with and contingent upon prevailing notions of science and philosophical orientation.

(Amy Bentley, associate professor in the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health, New York University)

Nancy N. Chen makes the complex and often confusing nexus of food and health understandable. Her book blends millennia-old wisdom with today's best scientific knowledge. It is also a delicious read filled with savory nuggets of uncommon insight.

(Andrew Smith, editor of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*)

About the Author

Nancy N. Chen is professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz (on leave) and is now teaching at Scripps College. A medical anthropologist, she also teaches courses on food, gender and health, ethnographic film, China, and Asian Americans.

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