

## NUTRITION BLACK FOODS



Sasha Gonzales  
healthpost@scmp.com

For years, nutritionists have urged us to load up on dark-green leafy veggies, deeply pigmented berries and red and orange foods such as carrots, salmon, beets and sweet potatoes to boost our immune system and prevent ill health.

If you've followed their advice, give yourself a pat on the back. Charmain Tan, a registered dietitian at Seventeen Nutrition Consultants (www.my17.com), says these foods are rich in potent antioxidants called phytochemicals (or plant chemicals), which help the body neutralise oxidative stress and fight disease.

Phytochemicals are what give foods their colour. Yellow or orange foods contain a phytochemical called beta-carotene and related carotenoids, while blue and purple foods are rich in anthocyanins, a class of flavonoids. Some red foods also contain these phytochemicals.

If a food's colour is a sign of its antioxidant content, then black

fruits, fungi, legumes and grains are nutritional powerhouses.

"Black foods contain high amounts of anthocyanin, which has been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer. Anthocyanin also has antiviral, anti-allergic, antiplatelet, anti-inflammatory, anti-tumour and antioxidant properties," Tan says.

Apart from antioxidants, these foods are also rich in important vitamins, minerals and fibre. If you'd like to reap the benefits of anthocyanins, there is no shortage of black foods to choose from.

Brown rice is good, but black is better, Tan says, because it is high in fibre, which is necessary for a healthy digestive system. Plus, it contains iron and other crucial minerals. The bran hull also has significantly higher amounts of vitamin E than that of brown rice – vitamin E is essential as it protects cells from damage by free radicals.

In ancient China, black rice was highly regarded for its nutritional benefits. It was known as "forbidden rice" because the nobles kept it to

themselves and forbade the common people to eat it.

A South Korean study found that protein-rich black soya beans are better than yellow or green soya beans, as they lower one's risk of thrombosis, Tan says. And black lentils, sometimes called beluga lentils, contain high levels of vitamin B and soluble fibre.

Another legume, black beans, aren't just high in fibre and iron; their dark skins also contain high levels of bioflavonoids. These are powerful antioxidants that may protect against cancer and heart disease. Bioflavonoids have a natural antibiotic effect on the body, as well.

Black fungus reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, as it lowers blood viscosity, softens the blood vessels, reduces blood fat and gets the blood flowing smoothly, Tan says.

And don't forget black tea, which is high in theaflavins. These are antioxidants that combat inflammation and support a healthy immune system. Some studies also suggest that regular consumption of

black tea can reduce the risk of stroke and coronary heart disease.

The next time you're planning a meal, try to introduce as many black ingredients as you can to create a dish that is well balanced and tasty.

For example, if you like tri-colour rice (made up of brown, red and white grains), add black to the mix for four-colour rice. Soaked dried black fungus is not only great with meat or vegetable stir-frys but also gives fresh salads a lovely crunch. Black sesame seeds are an excellent addition to home-made bread, muffins or cookies and impart a delicious earthy flavour to steamed vegetables, salads and noodles.

Tan suggests cooking a vegetarian meal once or twice a week using black lentils or beans. Think stews or casseroles, or a Mexican-style bean burrito. For a vitamin-rich snack or dessert, you can't beat blackberries – have them fresh, frozen or dried, or add them to your cake or muffin batter.

While black foods are packed with the good stuff, that's not to say they are superior to other foods.

"Each food is unique and carries a different amount of calories, macronutrients and micronutrients," Tan says.

So while they provide a host of nutritional benefits, you can have too much of these black superfoods.

Since they provide energy, overconsumption can lead to weight gain, although you'll find that, because of their high fibre content (in the case of black beans and lentils), you only need a small portion to feel satisfied. If you have kidney problems, you should monitor your intake of beans and lentils, too, as they're rich in protein.

And black tea contains a lot of caffeine, about 50mg per cup. (Green tea has only 8mg to 30mg a cup, while coffee contains anywhere between 100mg and 350mg.)

Tan suggests using the Food Pyramid as a guide when preparing your meals.

"Remember that moderation, balance and variety are the keys to sound nutrition," she says.

So choose a rainbow of colours, but be sure to add some black.

## RECIPE FOR HEALTH GREEK SALAD

## When it comes to the crunch, this dish is hard to beat

Sidney Schutte  
healthpost@scmp.com

Based on the Cretan diet, this Greek salad – a favourite at The Landmark Mandarin Oriental's MO Bar – is the perfect healthy dish to have on a hot summer day.

The people of Crete have one of the highest life expectancies in the world, around 80 years, and one of the lowest incidences of heart and other chronic diseases. The Cretan diet uses only organic, minimally processed, and in-season ingredients with an abundance of raw or boiled vegetables.

This low-calorie salad is full of flavour and contains many seasonal ingredients which provide different nutrients essential for good health. Cucumber is rich in vitamins A and

C, and folic acid. Bell peppers are high in fibre and vitamin C, and are a good source of antioxidants. Olives are full of antioxidants and contain mono-unsaturated fats, which can help lower cholesterol levels. Feta cheese is low in fat, full of calcium and rich in conjugated linoleic acid, a fatty acid and antioxidant that can help lower the risk of diabetes and heart disease.

## MO Bar's Greek salad

Serves four as a starter or two as a main course

**70g cucumber**  
**100g red bell peppers**  
**100g yellow bell peppers**  
**100g green bell peppers**  
**90g organic red mini tomatoes**  
**80g organic yellow mini tomatoes**

**100g pitted black olives**  
**100g pitted green olives**  
**40g feta cheese**  
**20g lemon juice**  
**60g extra virgin olive oil**  
**Sea salt flakes and black pepper**  
**½ small red onion**  
**A few sprigs of parsley or oregano**

Peel the cucumber and bell peppers, taking the seeds out. Slice into thin, 3cm strips. Cut tomatoes and olives lengthwise into quarters. Cut the feta cheese into 1cm cubes. Mix ingredients.

Dress with extra virgin olive oil, lemon juice, and salt and pepper. Garnish with fresh thinly cut onion rings and chopped parsley or small oregano leaves, and freshly ground black pepper from the mill. Serve with warm, crispy pita bread.

Sidney Schutte is the executive sous chef at The Landmark Mandarin Oriental



In-season produce makes this salad a winner. Photo: Jonathan Wong