spice makes nice

Fragrant cardamom lends its subtle sweetness to chai and is a natural digestive aid.

Ever taste the earthy vanilla undertones in chai or Indian milk desserts and wonder what that special flavor is? Most likely it’s the spice cardamom. In the traditional Indian medicine, Ayurveda, cardamom seeds are also used as lozenges to suck on after meals to help digestion. From an Ayurvedic perspective, acid from tea and coffee, and spicy foods like curries, irritate the intestines, leading to an increase of gas-producing mucus that then makes congestive ingredients such as milk, cheese, and wheat much more difficult to digest.

It turns out that the tiny cardamom seeds reduce mucus buildup caused by heavier foods—especially rich desserts—and contain natural carminatives, which reduce gas. Cardamom is also alkaline, making it a natural antidote to acid. As a member of the ginger family, cardamom has been used to make heavy and acidic foods easier to digest for more than 5,000 years. Throughout the Middle East even coffee is brewed with ground cardamom seeds, reducing its acid and neutralizing the stimulating effects of caffeine (plus, it tastes good!). Cardamom is also one of the richest sources of the phytochemical cineole, a potent antiseptic for bad breath, gum disease, sore throats, and respiratory conditions.

Ground into a spice with a mortar and pestle, cardamom can be dusted on French toast, stirred into puddings and squash soups, or sprinkled over vanilla ice cream. It’s sure to make ordinary foods naturally sweeter on the palate and easier on the tummy. JOHN DOUILLARD

sweet potato khir

This milk-based pudding with a pinch of cardamom makes a lovely fall dessert.

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

1 pinch saffron
8 cups plus 1 tablespoon milk
½ cup ghee
2 cups sweet potatoes, finely grated
¼ teaspoon ground cardamom
1 cup sugar

1. Soak the saffron in 1 tablespoon milk for 10 minutes.
2. On the stove, heat a large pot. Add the ghee and sweet potatoes, stirring occasionally until the potatoes are light brown and fragrant.
3. Pour the remaining milk over the potatoes slowly, stirring well. Add the cardamom, soaked saffron, and sugar. Stir a few times and bring to a boil.
4. Continue stirring to keep the khir from sticking to the pot as it thickens at a gentle boil, about 5 minutes. Turn off heat and cover until ready to serve.

Adapted with permission from Ayurvedic Cooking, by Usha Lad and Dr. Vasant Lad (Ayurvedic Press, 1994).