Power of the Umeboshi Plum

Cynthia Vann

Umeboshi is a pickled plum—a traditional Japanese food that has no equivalent in American cuisine. The umeboshi plum is a species of fruit called “prunus mume,” which translates as plum, but actually is a species of apricot. These plums contain citric and phosphoric acids, which are organic acids that are not broken down in the pickling process. Umeboshi plums are picked in the spring when ripe, then put through a process of soaking in a salty brine and alternating with drying in the sun, a process that requires the heat of summer. Traditional umeboshi are allowed to age in the salty brine for a year or longer before consumption.

A miracle occurs in the long pickling process. A strong combination is formed of very expansive (yin) factors and very contractive (yang) factors. This combination provides the usefulness of this food. Its powerful acidity has a paradoxical alkalinizing effect on the body. For example, three tenths of an ounce of umeboshi can neutralize the acidity of ½ cup of sugar. Equivalent substances that minimize the effect of sugar are ¼ cup of kombu, 1 cup of azuki beans, or 2½ cups of burdock root. Umeboshi plums also reduce fatigue, stimulate digestion, eliminate toxins, and facilitate calcium absorption.

Umeboshi plums contain citrus, which is helpful in the absorption of calcium. They are also said to help the liver process excess alcohol, restore the skin, help regulate sugar metabolism, prevent or cure anemia, and relieve acute stomach and intestinal pain. It is thought to be an antidote to food poisoning as well as a natural tranquilizer. Some regard an umeboshi a day as the best preventive medicine.

I did this, eating umeboshi on a regular basis and suggesting to my friends to do the same. When one friend said she hadn’t in awhile because she was afraid of the salt content, we derived a plan for taking forms of umeboshi with no salt content, specifically the extract. Ume extract is a black “tarry” substance, concentrated tenfold, made by boiling green umeboshi plums down to a concentrate. It has the equivalent citrus concentration to about 25 times that of lemon juice. It doesn’t contain salt, which makes it more effective than the plum for treatment of high blood pressure and other conditions that are not helped by high sodium levels. Ume extract when applied to the skin has been found to cure conditions such as ringworm and athlete’s foot. Plum extract is useful in curing opposite conditions—for example, it can cure both diarrhea and constipation. It is a powerful balancer and an incredible centering food.

Umeboshi plums and umeboshi extract are often used as is but there are other uses too, such as in using them to make teas. One can make a tea from umeboshi extract that is good for canker or cold sores, dysentery, acute intestinal, or stomach pain. One can make an umeboshi tea by placing
a plum in one quart of water, boiling for 30 minutes, and drinking when thirsty, or after exercising or hiking on very hot days. It is very refreshing and provides electrolytes. Electrolytes are very important as a sodium deficiency can cause low blood pressure and the heart to shut down.

The power of the umeboshi plum is well known; yet, there is another side to an umeboshi plum that is not as well known—the inside, the seed. Over the years, more than one teacher told me to save them and I did, thinking I might need them someday. One umeboshi pit is the size of a small marble, insignificant on its own and easily lost if set down. A group of pits requires a jar; and groups of jars were accumulating in my cupboard. There must be some way to use them!

I found a clue in Macrobiotic Home Remedies. A bonk with a hammer revealed a soft seed in the hard old pit. I decided to carbonize the seeds in a 450-degree oven. In eight minutes, they were black. I ground them to a powder and bingo—I had a new remedy I had never tried. I reviewed notes from a Kushi Institute class and found that the carbonized seeds are good for stomach trouble, intestinal pains, diarrhea, colds, stomach ulcer, intestinal cancer, counteracting nausea, reducing fevers, controlling coughs, and motion sickness. I also found that the shells could be made into a tea that is good for anemia, leukemia, and AIDS.

The shells also can be carbonized, which makes them even more powerful for the most expansive (yin) problems or diseases. It took a little longer to turn them black—about 30 minutes in a 450-degree oven. They are hard to pulverize even when carbonized, so you don’t need to do that, just black shell pieces will work for making teas; strain the shells pieces before drinking, of course.

I tried the umeboshi seed powder on myself for loose stools; I took a teaspoon of carbonized umeboshi seed in a cup of tea and in two days, I had a great stool and felt very well and centered.

Umeboshi plum seeds can be eaten, they taste something like nuts. A friend who was having a hard time getting out of bed due to heavy flu like symptoms, called to tell me she couldn’t visit. I told her to eat three umeboshi plum seeds. She had just enough strength to get up, break open three pits, and eat the seeds. The next day I got an excited response from her, “That heavy feeling in my chest, it’s gone, I feel so much better, I’m surprised it worked so fast!”

Just when I thought I had it all figured out, I got a new seed of information—the seed inside of an umeboshi plum contains a large source of laetrile, perhaps the largest concentration available. Laetrile is called “amygdalin,” “B17,” and “nitrilosides,” and is contained in many foods. Laetrile is found in apricot seeds, bitter almonds, macadamia nuts, buckwheat, and millet. (Bitter almond trees are banned in the United States.)

Dr. Elson Haas, MD, author of Staying Healthy with Nutrition: The Complete Guide to Diet and Nutrition Medicine states that 10 to 20 kernels of apricot seeds a day is good for prevention of disease and that one to two cups of bean sprouts may provide an equivalent amount. He reports other uses for laetrile include the treatment of high blood pressure and rheumatism. He calls for better-designed research to determine whether laetrile in its natural form is effective.

Other people know about the apricot seed as well. The Hunzas love their apricots and they prize the trees. Hunzas are known for their vitality and longevity. Many live to be 100 years old and are able to perform hard physical labor all their lives. They eat dozens of the seeds a day along with a healthy diet low in meat and dairy products and with lots of exercise daily. Cancer is rare among them.

In the USA, the FDA claims the laetrile contained in apricot seeds is toxic. It is not an approved substance, and its sale across state lines or international borders is criminal. Doctors who use it are harassed—commonly by their state medical boards.

So, what is the future of laetrile, the substance in an apricot pit? According to a BBC News report, there is a new two-stage drug that harnesses the power of cyanide to kill bowel cancer cells in the lab. It takes a lead from some plants that release cyanide to protect themselves from insect attack. The first drug contains the enzyme that will target the specific tumors, and the second drug contains the sugar, which would react with the enzyme to release cyanide to kill cancer cells.

This sounds an awful lot like how laetrile works. According to Ralph Moss, a former researcher at Sloan-Kettering, laetrile does not work on all cancers, but it had stopped metastases 100 percent of the time. He explained how it works: cancer loves sugar. The sugar in the apricot pits surrounds a phytochemical called nitriloside. The cancer draws in the sugar, eats it, and releases the nitriloside from the apricot. Cancer cells contain great quantities of an enzyme that when meeting nitriloside creates cyanide and benzaldehyde. Both are poisons and can kill cancer. (Http://www.mnwelldir.org/docs/cancer1/althry2.htm#Laetrile)

Could it be that the cancer industry has finally discovered laetrile but are not willing to call it that? Take this information and do your own research to learn more about these topics.
I leave you with a thought for the day, from Earth Prayers,

Gentle Goddess Earth
Who never asks for anything at all,
And gives us everything we have,
Thank you for this sweet water,
And your fragrance.

Retired from the Air Force in 1993, Cynthia discovered macrobiotics in 1994 with a visit to the Kushi Institute. Fascinated by macrobiotics, she made the transition to this way of eating and has been studying ever since. She has completed two Level IV training programs and attended her third this August. Cynthia’s goals are to complete the program and to continue studying to become a more creative cook. She enjoys hiking, caving, the outdoors, reading, and Toastmasters.

Note 1: Vitamin B₁₇ appears in abundance in untamed nature. Because B₁₇ is bitter to the taste, in man’s attempt to improve tastes and flavors for his own pleasure, he has eliminated bitter substances like B₁₇ by selection and cross-breeding. It can be stated as a general rule that many of the foods that have been domesticated still contain the vitamin B₁₇ in that part not eaten by modern man, such as the seeds in apricots. (Home.bluegrass.net)

Bibliography
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Question and Answer

Which Miso to Use?

Carl Ferre

MACROBIOTICS TODAY,
I have been generally using hatcho miso rather than milder types. What if anything are the differences between the various different types of miso as far as macrobiotics is concerned?

Thank you,
Lenard Shaw
Chicago, IL

DEAR LENARD,

Thank you for your inquiry. There are two main types of miso—long-term and short-term. Long-term misos are higher in amounts of salt and soybeans, contain less percentage of koji, and ferment in 1 to 3 years when traditionally made. Short-term misos are higher in percentage of koji, contain less soybeans and salt, and ferment in 2 to 8 weeks.

Miso is made of soybeans, a koji inoculant, and salt, and most times a grain (or other food)—most commonly barley or rice. There are many varieties available both from Japan and from domestic companies. Assuming the miso is traditionally made, the main macrobiotic consideration is the yin or yang quality of the miso in question. Chemically-processed misos are not recommended of course.

The types of long-term misos used most often in macrobiotic practice are barley (mugi), soybean (hatcho), and brown rice (genmai). Barley (mugi) miso is made from soybeans, koji inoculant, salt, and barley. It is sweeter tasting than soybean miso and is recommended for daily use by Aveline Kushi in Complete Guide to Macrobiotic Cooking.

Soybean (hatcho) miso is made from soybeans, koji inoculant and salt only. It is the strongest-tasting miso and is recommended by Aveline for making pickles and condiments such as tekka, and in soups. Brown rice (genmai) miso is made from soybeans, koji inoculant, salt, and brown rice. Aveline recommends it for occasional and summertime use.

The long-term misos listed from yang to yin are: soybean (hatcho), barley (mugi), and brown rice (genmai). More salt and a longer fermentation time make miso more yang, while more koji makes miso more yin. Other long-term misos you might see are red miso (usually a barley or other-grain miso), mame (another soybean miso), and kome (another rice miso although not necessarily brown rice). Wheat and other grains may be used to make miso and I’ve tasted some good varieties using other beans such as chickpeas or peanuts.

The types of short-term misos you will find are mellow, sweet, white, or shiro miso. These are good in summer soups, especially in hotter climates, in spreads, sauces, or dressings. Aveline recommends mellow miso to be used when serving fish since fish is more yang and mellow misos are more yin than any of the long-term misos.

For the highest quality miso, look for “traditionally made” or “naturally aged,” “100% organic ingredients,” and “sun-dried sea salt” on the label.

Further information on miso can be found in The Miso Book and Japanese Foods That Heal by John and Jan Belleme.