

bon appétit

healthyish

What to Eat for How You Feel and Other Lessons From an Ayurvedic Chef



Divya Alter has just brewed a pot of chai when I arrive at the sunny East Village space where she leads Ayurvedic cooking classes above her newly opened restaurant, **Divya's Kitchen**. I am late and also flustered, having just spent several humiliating minutes trying very hard to open the wrong door. Later, we will establish that the real culprit is my overly airy constitution, which makes me anxious, and also cold.

When Alter discovered Ayurveda, she wasn't feeling particularly well. After years in the kitchen at an underground ashram in Communist Plovdiv, the native Bulgarian had gone to India to study local cooking. "I was drinking water from the River Ganges without purifying it," she laughs. "And I got a really bad amoebic infection." She wound up in a Bombay hospital, weak, emaciated, unable to eat. When she didn't respond to antibiotics, her doctor suggested she try their Ayurvedic clinic, where she was prescribed a special diet: everything blended, nothing raw, minimal spices, no nightshades. It was a revelation. "For the first time, I realized how food can be used as medicine," Alter says. "It was like, *whoa*, let me learn how to take care of myself."

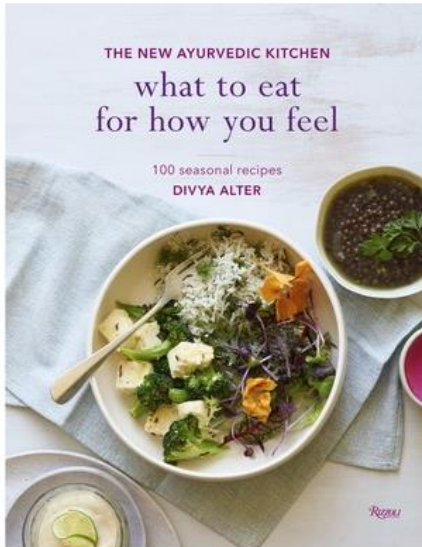
Ayurveda is an ancient Vedic medical system focused on maintaining balance: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Food is one of its core tools—healing and re-centering the body with careful combinations of foods, herbs, and spices. There are a lot of rules, and there are also no rules. For the most part, the question isn't whether foods are good, or even good *for you*, but whether they are good for you *right now*, which has to do with your particular body, but also your mind, emotions, and physical surroundings.

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“Connect with what’s going on for you right now, and then choose something that will help you balance that.”



“It always begins with connecting with ourselves, with our needs, with our environment,” Alter explains. It’s no coincidence that her cookbook, which comes out this month, is called *What to Eat for How You Feel*.

“How you feel,” in Ayurveda, depends first and foremost on which elements—air, fire, water, earth, and space—dominate your constitution, or **dosha**. Some people are dominated by fiery energy (Pitta); others are more earthy (Kapha), or more airy (Vata). But that’s just your baseline. “Your constitution is your perfect reference,” Alter says. But your imbalance, “*That’s* what you need to work on.” She checks my pulse and determines that, in my current airy state, I should eat more ginger.

If you’re not the kind of person who plans on getting a professional pulse read, Alter has a much simpler

recommendation: eat seasonally, using spices to adjust for your particular digestive state. Her cookbook is organized in a similar way, suggesting tweaks like balancing airiness with cashews in a curry, or omitting the chilis from a stir-fry if you’re feeling fiery. Some recipes are Indian-inspired; others aren’t. While Ayurveda originated in India, there’s no reason the principles—eat good foods, in combinations and preparations compatible with your particular type of digestion—can’t be applied to all sorts of cuisines, Alter says. (You can make an **Ayurvedic khichari**, but you can also make an Ayurvedic spinach risotto.) The principle is the same. “Go with the law of balance,” she urges. “Connect with what’s going on for you right now, and then choose something that will help you balance that.”

In Ayurvedic cooking, a balanced dish combines elements of sweet, salty, sour, bitter, pungent, and astringent.

At the restaurant, Alter obviously can’t adjust every dish to accommodate each diner’s particular digestive needs. Nor does she bother with fussy menu explanations. “Our restaurant is for mainstream people,” Alter tells me. “We didn’t want to make it complicated.” Instead, she focuses her menu on seasonality, a universal tenet of Ayurveda. In the winter, Alter says, she’s focused on warm, grounding foods specifically chosen to balance out the airier qualities of the season—vegetable curry in cashew sauce, for example, and lasagna with almond milk béchamel. In the spring, the menu will shift toward crunchier, spicier, more pungent foods—asparagus soup, or mung bean salad—to compensate for dampness in the air. For Alter, if a dish is seasonal and has a balance of flavors (in Ayurveda, that means elements of sweet, salty, sour, bitter, pungent, and astringent), then “more than half of the battle is won.”

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In India, Ayurvedic training exists alongside Western-style medical training; in the U.S., it's generally deemed "alternative medicine." The National Institutes of Health's official stance is that "there aren't enough well-controlled clinical trials and systematic research reviews" to prove its benefits, though that doesn't mean they don't exist. Ayurveda "is highly compatible" with Western medicine, Alter says. She hopes, eventually, that Western medical doctors will be open to "combining the best parts of both."

In the meantime, I've upped my ginger consumption. Of course, that fix may be temporary. "You might need completely different things a few months from now," Alter warns me. Such is the nature of balance.

Make Divya's one-pot khichari at home:



Simple Khichari from Divya's Kitchen



This restorative stew, from Divya's Kitchen, features a rotating cast of hard and soft vegetables. You can work with whatever vegetables you have on hand, such as carrots, zucchini, broccoli, green beans, or asparagus.

[SEE RECIPE](#)

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