

## Exotic strategy

*Many Americans trying a new menu of preventive foods*

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As the old saw goes, an apple a day keeps the doctor away.

These days, a new crop of exotic foods and drinks is overshadowing the familiar apple as the best way to avoid ailments ranging from the effects of stress to cancer and heart disease.

Açai, goji berries, aged garlic, holy basil (tulsi) and yerba mate, all loaded with anti-oxidants, are the new darlings of the preventive health-foods pantry.

As the first wave of baby boomers begins to turn 60, many are hoping that what they eat and drink can help them avoid the ailments that plagued their parents' generation.

Their desire to look and feel young as long as possible, and their interest in organic and naturally raised products, are fueling a boom in foods and drinks once outside the typical American's dietary palette.

"I think people are trying to use Mother Nature's fruits to stay healthy and almost as an alternative medicine or self-prescribed medicine," said Chris Cuvelier, president of the company that makes Zola Açai, which he calls a power juice beverage.

Açai, the purple fruit of a Brazilian palm that's eaten for energy in its native land, is the hottest among the new crop of super foods, showing up in everything from sorbets and drinks to capsules and concentrates.

Proponents brag about its content of antioxidants and omega 3, 6 and 9 fatty acids. A 2004 University of Florida study established that açai has active antioxidant compounds. But few studies have been done on whether these compounds have protective effects.

On the other hand, aged garlic, an odorless extract derived from the bulb that gives scampi its punch, is a reliable standard in the alternative medicine cabinet, said Mark Blumenthal, founder of the American Botanical Council, a nonprofit organization in Austin, Texas, that conducts research and educates consumers about medicinal plants.

Aged garlic and its active ingredient, allacin, have been the subject of more than 400 scientific studies and clinical trials. One study conducted at the Harbor UCLA Medical Center found that cardiac patients who took Kyolic aged garlic extract had 65 percent less coronary plaque formation and lower cholesterol levels than the control group.

Açai and aged garlic, along with holy basil, yerba mate and goji berries, are part of a growing category of functional foods: natural and manufactured items consumed because of health benefits that go beyond satisfying hunger and thirst.

The U.S. functional food market was estimated at \$20.2 billion in 2002 and is expected to grow to \$37.7 billion by 2007, according to a report by the Business Communication Company.

While the term “functional foods” is marketing-speak, there are plenty of things people consume for reasons that have nothing to do with nourishment, said Blumenthal. An obvious one is coffee, which people drink for that jolt of caffeine in the morning; so are prunes, as your grandmother can attest.

## **Herbal tradition**

Foods such as holy basil and goji berries, which seem unusual to Americans, are as familiar as prunes and coffee to people in India and Tibet, where both have been used for centuries in herbal medicines.

“The line between food and medicine is very blurry in many countries,” Blumenthal said. “We're seeing a merging of health and natural products industries with the gourmet industry, where people want natural things that provide health benefits.”

For people unfamiliar with these foods, it can be difficult to sort out the facts from hyperbole. One source of information is the American Botanical Council Web site, [www.herbalgram.org](http://www.herbalgram.org). Scientific studies can be researched at [www.pubmed.com](http://www.pubmed.com).

Some of these foods have huge bodies of scientific literature and clinical research proving their effectiveness. Others are folk remedies in their native lands, where their effectiveness is supported mostly by anecdotal evidence and animal studies.

Tulsi, or holy basil, is revered as a sacred herb in India, where it has been used in medicinal preparations for 5,000 years.

A component of holy basil, eugenol, was shown to lower blood levels of stress hormones in rats in a study conducted in India. Another study found that feeding diabetic rats holy basil reduced levels of blood sugar and body and blood fat.

Goji berries are surrounded by anecdotal tales, including one of a well under a goji vine that had youth-restoring waters. The berries do have amino acids, protein, vitamins and a tangy sweet taste, which prompted CLIF bar to include them in its Lemon, Vanilla & Cashew bar, part of the Nectar line of organic fruit and nut bars.

“They were traditionally thought of as a strength-building and longevity food,” Tara DelloIacono Thies, registered dietitian for CLIF Bar and LUNA, said of goji berries. “When we look more analytically, they are high in antioxidants like vitamin A and C.”

Goji berries are an effective source of antioxidants, according to a 2004 study from Taiwan's Kaohsiung Medical University. Two studies done at Chinese universities and published in 2005 found that components in goji berries improved insulin resistance and inhibited the growth of liver cancer cells.

## **Coffee competitor**

Yerba mate, the leaves of a rain-forest tree, first appeared in the U.S. about 20 years ago, but now it is becoming trendy. The upscale tea chain Te Vana carries a couple of flavored mates, and local Pannikins sell a chai mate mixed with cloves and cardamom pods.

Yerba mate is a staple beverage in Argentina, where it is preferred 7 to 1 over coffee, said David Karr, a founder of Guayaki, a line of mate teas and drinks. “What it comes down to is, people are looking for a healthy source of caffeine,” Karr said. “Yerba mate is the healthiest source in that it has naturally 24 vitamins and minerals, 15 amino acids and antioxidants.”

An Emory University study published in 2005 found that yerba mate contained natural proteasome inhibitors that may help in the treatment of cancer. A compound in mate was found to be more potent than green tea or red wine in combating nitrosative stress, which breaks down DNA and plays a role in neurological disorders.

T.J. McIntyre, a founder of Pixie Mate, said it's encouraging that even big health-maintenance organizations are pushing the benefits of preventive measures.

“Food manufacturers are seeing an opportunity in trying to get people to take responsibility for their own health and wellness,” McIntyre said. “The idea is, you don't wait until you're sick. You maintain an exercise routine and eat products that are healthy for your body.”

## **YERBA MATE**

What is it? Yerba mate (MAH-tay) is a leaf from a small tree in the holly family that grows in South America. It's found as loose tea, tea bags or tea concentrates.

Tastes like: Plain mate has a grassy or herbal taste. It is mixed with chai spices, green tea or cocoa to form better-tasting combinations.

Claims: Mate is said to be a nourishing stimulant. Backers say it is healthier than coffee or green tea; it reportedly boosts the metabolism and gives a less jittery feeling than coffee. Some doctors in Argentina drink it before surgery to steady their hands and give them energy.

Facts: Mate leaves contain abundant antioxidants, including vitamins A, C and E, and B complex vitamins. Mate also contains 15 amino acids and minerals, including calcium, potassium, iron and selenium. A 2005 study at the University of Illinois found that mate is rich in phenolic compounds that inhibit the growth of oral cancer cells.

## **AGED GARLIC**

What is it? Organic garlic is aged for 20 months to mellow the sulfur compounds that give garlic its strong flavor and aroma. Wakunaga America Company markets capsules and extract under the Kyolic brand name.

Tastes like: Aged garlic extract is odorless but tastes like garlic.

Claims: Garlic is reputed to lower blood pressure and cholesterol, boost immunity and improve liver function.

Facts: The health benefits of aged garlic have been the subject of 400 university studies. A yearlong study of cardiac patients led by Dr. Michael Budoff at Harbor UCLA Medical Center found that those who took Kyolic aged garlic extract had 65 percent less coronary plaque formation, improved cholesterol levels and lower blood homocysteine levels. A study at Cornell University and East Carolina University Medical School found that a substance only found in aged garlic, SAMC, inhibited cancerous tumors of the prostate, breast and colon.

## **GOJI BERRY**

What is it? Goji is the fruit of *lycium barbarum*, a vine in the potato and tomato family that grows in Tibet and China. It's sold as dried, pinkish-red berries or juice concentrate and used in a CLIF Nectar bar.

Tastes like: Dried gojis have a delicate, sweet flavor, like a cross between raspberry and plum with a hint of tea.

Claims: Web sites touting gojis claim they have the highest level of antioxidants of any food known. The fruit is associated with longevity; a company called Murad uses goji extract in anti-aging skin products, and many Web sites mention a Chinese man, Li Quing Luen, who purportedly lived to be 252, in part by eating goji berries daily. Tibetans believe that eating a handful of goji berries every day will ensure a good mood.

Facts: Goji is high in the antioxidant vitamins A and C, and vitamins B1, B2 and B6, as well as amino acids, protein and minerals, including calcium and zinc. Studies on rats found that goji berries protected the nervous system and improved insulin resistance.

## **TULSI (HOLY BASIL)**

What is it? Holy basil (*ocimum sanctum*) is a member of the mint family and a distant cousin of culinary basil. In India, it's known as tulsi and regarded as one of the most powerful herbs in the holistic medicine system known as Ayurveda. It's commonly found in tea, tinctures and herbal capsules.

Tastes like: Tulsi tea has a mild, slightly sweet mint flavor.

Claims: Tulsi is believed to relieve a variety of stresses, boost immunity, enhance stamina, alleviate cold and flu symptoms and promote healthy metabolism.

Facts: Tulsi contains vitamins A and C, calcium, zinc and iron. One component of tulsi, eugenol, was shown to lower blood levels of stress hormones in rats in a 1997 study at the Sri Ramachandra Medical College in India. A study at Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda in India found that feeding diabetic rats holy basil for a month reduced levels of blood sugar and body and blood fat.

## **ACAI**

What is it? The açai (AH-sigh-EE) is a giant purple berry that grows on a palm in the rain forests of Brazil. It's available locally in juice and pulp forms.

Tastes like: A tangy cherry-berry mix. Some juices have a prune-like flavor.

Claims: Dermatologist Dr. Nicholas Perricone dubbed açai the No. 1 super food, capable of helping people look younger longer. Brazilians use it as an energy food; it's a favorite drink of jujitsu fighters and surfers.

Facts: Açai berries are loaded with powerful antioxidants called proanthocyanidins. Testing of antioxidant (or ORAC) value by Brunswick Labs in Massachusetts found that açai pulp has more antioxidants than pomegranate or blueberries. Açai berries also contain omega 3, 6 and 9 fatty acids, eight essential amino acids, iron, potassium and calcium.

Caveat: Not all açai products are created equal; some have more açai pulp and therefore higher antioxidant and nutrient content than others.