

CONGEE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF WET, COOKED BREAKFASTS

By Andrew Sterman

All foods share their energetic influences when eaten. Understanding single foods and their combinations, implemented with clear diagnoses and well-founded theory forms the basis of Chinese medicine dietary therapy.

Hydration is key to good health, and wet breakfasts are an often forgotten key to good hydration. Wet breakfasts—porridges and congee—absorb a great deal of water as they cook. This fluid is gradually given up during digestion, like a time-release capsule of healthy hydration. Beyond effectively bringing hydration into the system, wet breakfasts soothe and restore the organs of digestion themselves (stomach, spleen-pancreas, small and large intestine). Wet-cooked porridge or congee is the breakfast of choice for a wide variety of health needs ranging from:

- tonifying weak digestion
- conditions of chronic dehydration
- inflammation or heat pathologies
- young, old or those convalescing
- anyone who stressed their digestion with a very large or challenging dinner the previous evening, stayed up too late, drank too much wine, ate while worried or upset

Anecdotally, eating wet breakfasts has been responsible for remarkable improvements in a number of individuals I have taught who were struggling with serious conditions. Dangerously high blood pressure brought into normal range, severely weakened digestion brought back to function... there are many instances of success, large and small. Dramatic improvements are not difficult, although adopting consistent new breakfast habits sometimes can be. Since chronic dehydration underlies many serious health conditions, consistent adoption of cooked, wet breakfasts can provide real improvement as well as symptom relief, treating root as well as branches. Although it is trendy to avoid carbs and grains, it is really sugar and poorly combined foods that cause metabolic problems for so many people. Classically, grains are Earth foods, the center of the Five Elements in the early *wu xing* arrangement. If skillfully used, grains are central to diet and digestion, the foundation of good health.

As with all common foods, recipes vary between cultures, locations and even families. How to make good congee and other porridges is one of the common questions during dietary

consults or while teaching energetics of food. Some recipes and a bit of dietary theory are important to have ready.

RICE CONGEE

To make good congee (*jook* in Cantonese), use high quality medium or long-grain Asian-style white rice. Avoid short-grain or risotto rices as they are too sticky.

One cup of dry rice makes congee for 4-6 people.

1. Boil 8-12 cups water in a separate pot.
2. Put 1 cup uncooked long-grain white rice in large, empty pot. Turn heat to high, add 1 tablespoon oil (grapeseed, for example. Always select oils for appropriate energetic and freshness). Stir, coating each grain. Add two generous pinches salt.
3. Add just enough boiling water to float the grains, perhaps 1 cup (no need to measure). Stir constantly as the grains absorb the water. When almost absorbed, add more boiling water, keep stirring. After 3 or 4 additions of water and constant stirring (about 10-15 minutes), the grains will have released starch into the water.
4. Then add a lot more water and turn flame down to a “gentlemanly simmer”



for about 45 minutes, now stirring occasionally. Do not allow the grains to settle and stick to the bottom of the pot. Add hot water as needed to get the special congee consistency: milky water between discernible rice grains, very soft-cooked.

5. Congee is always served with other things. Start simply but elegantly with slivered fresh ginger and sliced scallions, a splash of tamari and toasted sesame oil. More substantial additions are common: sliced fish, seafood, nuts, squash, corn, soft-boiled eggs, cooked bean sprouts, dried scallops, sliced pork, etc., often utilizing leftovers from the refrigerator or contributions from the freezer. Select ingredients based on your knowledge of food energetics and clear diagnosis.

Energetically, wet cooked rice strongly nourishes stomach yin and fluids. Soy sauce and scallions provide a dietary version of the herbal decoction *Cong Chi Tang*, from the writings of the Daoist sage, Ge Hong (283-343 CE). In *Cong Chi Tang* scallion whites and fermented soybeans combine to treat wind-cold: the pungent fermented soybeans nourish fluids and the mild spiciness of scallion helps move those fluids to the lungs and skin, opening the exterior for a mild healing

sweat (good hydration and transport of fluids to the lungs and skin are necessary for effectively meeting the onset of common cold or flu). Fresh ginger supports this simple and elegant strategy, harmonizes digestion, resolves bloating and clears phlegm. Toasted sesame supports kidney yang, providing a gentle, uplifting energy appropriate for morning, even when not pushing out wind-cold.

Some kind of protein and fat is almost always served with congee as well. One traditional combination is white fish filets and boiled peanuts (organic only), or a few slices of fatty pork. Egg is the easiest way to go, protein and fat together. Interestingly, boiled egg and congee are much easier to digest than fried egg with toast (both are egg with grain). Wet-cooking is an earth element method while frying can stress the liver/wood system, an effect amplified by the dry baking and then toasting of the grain. Individuals seeking to reduce inflammation or liver constraint would benefit more from congee with poached or boiled eggs than fried eggs with toast. For many people, the method of cooking is as important as the choice of grain itself.

A favorite is congee with dried scallops. Drying the scallops consolidates their flavor, amplifying the yuan-constitutional support they provide. Rehydrate three dried scallops per person in 10 cups cool water, then bring toward a boil. When hot, cook the congee using scallop water. Prior to serving, place the scallops in each bowl with the condiments. Energetically, congee is best when selecting foods that nourish the kidney or yuan-source qi level (scallops, fish, egg, peanuts). The wet-cooked rice and the source qi level protein make a very strong combination, nourishing ying-nutritive qi and yuan-constitutional qi in a powerful way.

When making congee, home cooks tend to make certain common mistakes:

- Do not use leftover rice that is already cooked. It is the slow absorption of water that makes congee such a special dish. If you have leftover rice, make stir-fried rice if appropriate (stir-frying as a method stimulates liver/wood, while the congee method nourishes spleen/earth).
- Don't forget to include 1-2 tablespoons good quality oil at the beginning, and a nice bit of salt. Restaurant congee can be very salty; mine has just enough to be noticed if you taste for it. Salt provides a mineral contribution and a hint of the idea that all life originates in the sea. Gentle saltiness resonates with the kidneys just as extreme saltiness stresses them. Oil (or fat from meats, seeds or nuts) is essential for nutrition and is part of overall 'hydration', nourishment of fluids.

- Be sure to add plenty of water. Cooking congee is a revelation—the rice absorbs, absorbs and absorbs. When you believe it has enough, it thickens again. Simply open it up with a bit more boiled water. One reason any porridge is so beneficial is that we are eating grain after it has absorbed as much fluid as it will. That's when it's ready to eat, bringing all that hydration to our center.
- Never eat congee plain. It is always completed with condiments and usually with one or two protein items. If sick, it is fine with only basic condiments until appetite returns.
- Avoid too many additions to one bowl. As with any dish, clarity is more important than complexity.

In Chinese medicine dietetics, rice is classified as sweet, neutral in temperature, with affinity of spleen-pancreas and stomach.

MILLET PORRIDGE

Millet makes very good porridge. It is common to find a huge pot of millet porridge next to the huge pot of congee in breakfast places in northern China. White rice is the easiest grain to digest, especially good for morning eating, but if whole grains are desired, millet is the best choice. Millet is non-glutinous, classified as sweet and salty, neutral or slightly cooling (anti-inflammatory), with affinity of spleen-pancreas, stomach, kidney and lung.

One cup dry millet makes porridge serving 4-6.

1. Always wash millet prior to cooking by flooding it in a pot with cold water, then gently tipping the water over the side 3 or 4 times until the water runs clear. After washing, use a strainer to remove remaining standing water.
2. Turn the heat to medium high, stir the millet constantly to dry, then dry roast it. Dry roasting contributes yang qi and a nutty aroma.
3. Traditionally, no oil or salt is added but I usually add an oil or butter and some salt.
4. Cook in the congee method. Millet is less sticky than rice and therefore much easier to cook; occasional stirring is sufficient.
5. After 30-45 minutes the millet has given up its starch to the water. There is water between the softened grains that is somewhat thick with millet starch.
6. Serve like congee, in a bowl with a few things added such as seeds, an egg, some tamari.

Millet is the most hydrating grain, nourishing *jin*-thin and *ye*-thick fluids, and pairs best of all grains with nuts, seeds

and fruit. Millet porridge with dried apricots nourishes hormones and relaxes diaphragm constraint, useful for hot flashes accompanied by mood swings (use dried figs if focus is on clearing lower *jiao*). Pairing millet with nuts, seeds or fruit opens many possibilities for delicious and therapeutic cooking.

BUCKWHEAT PORRIDGE

Similar porridges are easily made with buckwheat (*kasha*). Use whole buckwheat kernels for congee-type porridge, or cracked buckwheat for a creamy consistency. Add seeds, nuts, eggs, other protein and salt. Buckwheat is not related to wheat and is gluten-free. It is classified as sweet and warming (when roasted as *kasha*), with spleen-pancreas, heart and large intestine affinities.

POLENTA OR CORN GRIT PORRIDGE

Another western-style porridge is made with polenta or corn grits. Use organic corn; GMO foods raise internal heat through challenging the kidneys, the organ system that adapts to change (too much modified corn is not designed for human consumption in any case). Start with some fat (I use butter with corn polenta or grits), ample salt, then boiling water, whisking constantly to avoid lumps. I know people who serve this with honey; I prefer a bit more butter, pinch of salt and a grind of black pepper if a little boost is wanted (and not a problem for the individual).

Quality depends upon fine ingredients (we buy heirloom organic grits online). Traditional grits need an hour or more of cooking; instant grits lack flavor. Find the type you prefer. Corn is sweet and neutral, with spleen-pancreas, stomach and kidney affinities.

QUINOA, AMARANTH AND TEFF PORRIDGES

Quinoa, amaranth and teff make excellent porridges. Amaranth is my favorite but quinoa is most popular. Teff is smallest, dark brown, nutty in flavor, and excellent. They are gluten-free, rich in protein, fiber and minerals, easy to cook and delicious. Amaranth and teff are too tiny to wash, but quinoa needs washing to remove saponins. Cook simply with boiled water, whisking to keep smooth, adding water to reach porridge consistency. Use much more water than when preparing these grains as a side dish or to be included in recipes such as quinoa salad.

WHEAT PORRIDGE

Wheat has a very long history as a breakfast porridge. The grains would be cracked, toasted or ground, then boiled until soft. Historically, wheat has been eaten as porridge as much as baked into bread. Beer began as wheat or barley porridge that may have inadvertently fermented. Granted, a steady diet of wheat and barley porridge was boring and, of course, contains gluten. Gluten is a set of proteins that a small mi-

nority of individuals can't tolerate (celiac disease) and that can gradually cause inflammation problems in a much larger proportion of the population (gluten sensitivity). Nonetheless, if it is well tolerated, wheat is very useful as porridge for convalescence, as it is strongly tonifying. The best use of wheat is short term, when tonification outweighs the problems from gluten. Specifically, wheat porridge helps build and hold blood, useful for blood deficiency with fatigue or lethargy. Once benefit has been seen, return to rotating grains to avoid problems from overeating one.

Many wheat varieties are available; ancient hybrids (spelt, kamut, emmer, freekeh) do contain gluten and are significantly easier to digest. Individuals with celiac cannot eat them, but individuals with wheat or gluten sensitivity often can. Wheat is sweet and warming, and has spleen-pancreas, heart and kidney affinities.

OATMEAL

Oats, as an herbalist friend and I were discussing, have a more complicated history than their popularity today would suggest. Until recently they were more available in apothecaries than in food shops. Oats were used for their soothing quality: internally for soothing digestion and externally to soothe skin conditions in creams and poultices.

In Chinese medicine dietetics, oats are classified as sticky, as are glutinous grains, but they don't contain gluten (unless processed in wheat factories). Oats are sweet, slightly warming, with spleen-pancreas and stomach affinity. The bulk fiber in oats promotes peristalsis while the stickiness balances with some restraining quality. They are simultaneously cleansing and building. Like rice and millet, oats are moistening (wheat and rye are somewhat drying, although less so in a porridge than as bread.)

Rolled oats are more soothing and sticky while steel cut oats are less sticky, but a bit harder to digest (use only if digestion is robust). Avoid instant oats and avoid cooking oats in milk (adds to their sticky quality and reduces their benefit). If milk is desired, cook first with water then add milk to finish along with digestive spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg, coriander, and a bit of honey. (A long grain rice version this is the dish Buddha received to regain strength after his enlightenment—he ate only this, one bowl per day, brought by the buffalo herding girl who had found him collapsed under the bodhi tree.)

Cook oatmeal long enough to allow the grains to absorb as much water as they will (many people serve it too dry). Add sliced almonds, walnuts, pepitas, sunflower seeds, raisins, apricot or fig, and spices such as cinnamon. Most people add a bit of sweetener, but think of this as a harmonizer, not a feature.

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With oats, discern whether the stickiness is appropriate or not. If not, use rice, millet, quinoa or buckwheat porridge. The fiber in oats makes them useful to treat stagnation, but some care has to be taken to insure that the stickiness and relative difficulty in digestion can be tolerated. When in doubt, rotate grains, but do include wet-cooked porridges and congee in the morning menu. It's one of the simplest and most powerful things we can do to take care of ourselves. Delicious, too.

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