

THE late renowned food critic Anthony Bourdain had this to say about durians: "It smelled like you'd buried somebody holding a big wheel of Stilton (cheese) in his arms, then dug him up a few weeks later."

Despite this visceral description of the durian's pungent odour, the fact remains that the King of Fruits is more popular today than ever, not just domestically, but also internationally.

China has recently approved the large scale importation of the frozen fruit from Malaysia in order to satiate a growing Chinese appetite for the large spiky flavoured-grenade that is the durian.

As the durian becomes more of a mainstay in the diet of the world's most populous nation, it is fitting that we better acquaint ourselves with the health properties of this equally beloved and despised fruit.

When it comes to most fruits, we tend to be quite confident in our understanding of the fruit's nutritional value.

After all, an apple a day keeps the doctor away, and who isn't well aware that lemons and oranges are packed with vitamin C, good for keeping scurvy at bay?

Certainly, there is an abundance of anecdotal advice pertaining to the "heatiness" of the durian and how best to consume it, but many struggle to ascertain facts from fiction.

Consume moderately

IMU (International Medical University) Healthcare dietitian Dr Lee Ching Li first notes the unfortunate truth about our favourite smelly fruit: it is packed with calories.

With a total of 147 calories for every 100 grammes, the King of Fruits is truly also the King of Calories, surpassing the mango-steen, jackfruit, lychee and guava.

The silver lining?

The durian is not just rich in carbohydrates and fats, it is also rich in several antioxidants that can promote health.

This means that when taken in moderation, durians can form part of a healthy diet.

But if one were to overindulge, it could lead to more harm than good.

Ideally, when eating durian with friends and family, one should stick to a portion of two to three seeds.

Two seeds contain the same calorie count as one large banana, while five seeds add up to an entire bowl of rice.

Meaning that if one were to feast upon fifteen seeds at a party, they would consume the caloric equivalent of three bowls of rice!

And if durian is eaten before or

How healthy is the durian?

Many Malaysians are happy to gorge themselves on durian whenever they have the opportunity, but that may not be exactly very healthy.



Due to its high calorie count, it is advisable to only have two to three durian seeds each time you eat it; however, most Malaysians will happily down far more than that. — Filepic

after a meal, it is even more important to be aware of its high calorie count, so as to not overeat and put oneself at risk of obesity or diabetes.

Generally, there are a few groups that should be particularly mindful of how much durian they consume.

People who need or want to lose weight, diabetics and those with high cholesterol levels all fall into this category.

For these people, the rich and decadent durian fruit cannot be gorged upon like grapes.

Studies have also shown that durian consumption can increase the heart rate of healthy humans, while in lab rats with high blood pressure (hypertension), durian has been shown to increase blood pressure further.

For this reason, people with hypertension may want to take some precautions when it comes to the portions and frequency of their durian consumption.

Dr Lee also advises those undergoing dialysis to avoid durian as it is packed with potassium, a mineral that dialysis patients might have trouble excreting

from their system.

But is the durian really "heaty"?

Well, it turns out that this observation has some truth to it!

Being such an energy- and nutrient-dense fruit, the body needs to work extra hard to digest durian, causing a genuine, though slight, increase in body temperature.

How about the myth that mixing alcohol and durian can result in death?

While not true, Dr Lee does note that the sulphur-containing volatiles (substances that vaporise easily) of the durian actually reduce the efficiency of an enzyme that helps with the liver's ability to process alcohol.

To make matters worse, many East Asians have an inherited deficiency of this enzyme.

These two factors make eating durian and drinking alcohol an inadvisable mix.

The sulphur-containing volatiles and esters of the durian are the cause of its divisive smell.

Overall, Dr Lee's advice is to enjoy durian in moderation, eating enough to get the benefits of

its rich nutrients and antioxidants, but not too much that the calories get the better of us.

Balance the 'heatiness'

But what about a traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) perspective?

IMU Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine lecturer Dr Wong Zhi Hang says that TCM recognises durian as a fruit that can bring many benefits to the body, replenishing the body and leaving people feeling warm and excited.

He warns that durian in excess can "boil" the body by generating too much heat and energy, making it a "heaty" food, as many people believe.

In fact, most TCM practitioners do not recommend the intake of other "heaty" foods along with the durian, as it increases the risk of "overheating".

Instead, Dr Wong confirms that the age-old Malaysian habit of eating durian with mangosteen is a good idea.

Both these fruits will promote smooth bowel movement as they

are rich in fibre.

Mangosteen is also able to neutralise the "heat" of durian as it is a "cold" fruit.

He also suggests having some salt water with your durian to help vanquish some of the "heat", as salt is associated with "cooling" properties.

In TCM, the belief is that durian can contribute to the production of phlegm if you have a cough with yellow phlegm.

Nevertheless, the durian gets the TCM stamp of approval, so long as you take steps to keep the body in balance.

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