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# SPINACH COOKIES

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The two girls had spotted my stash of devil's food cookies. "Can we have some?" they asked, wide-eyed and salivating.

I had to think fast. "They're spinach cookies. You know you don't like spinach," I fibbed while offering the cookies and hoping the threat of vegetables would discourage them.

The girls crinkled their noses, deliberated a minute, and then nodded affirmatively. The lure of chocolate was greater than their dislike for spinach. They eyed me suspiciously as they bit into the deliciously sweet cookies. No bitter spinach taste. They were delighted.

For many weeks thereafter, my daughters told the story of the luscious spinach cookies to their friends whose parents called for the recipe. I shamefully explained the deception to each disappointed parent. We all agreed that getting our kids to eat vegetables was an ordeal; baking spinach cookies would have been such a wonderful solution to the problem.

I may have misjudged my kids' response, but there are many people who would have recoiled in horror at the thought of eating a cookie containing vegetables. Why do some of us hate vegetables so much?

Our perception of how a food tastes is dependent on several factors: the actual taste (bitter, sweet, sour, salty, or umami—the savory flavor in aged cheese and soy sauce), how the food looks (color, size, shape), the texture (mushy, crunchy, creamy) and the temperature at which the food is consumed. Most people favor sweet foods over sour or bitter foods, and crunchy and creamy seem to have an edge over mushy.

Both nature and nurture determine our taste preferences. An important piece of the nature puzzle is a child's first food, breast milk or baby formula, which is sweet-tasting. That sets the stage for a fondness for sweet foods.

The nurture effect comes from early conditioning by the caregivers who feed us. Since most of us already like sweet foods, we tend to offer them to our kids with smiles on our faces and encouragement in our voices. Have you ever seen a parent feed a kid his first taste of ice cream with a frown on his or her face?

It is believed that humans instinctively reject bitter-tasting foods as protection against eating toxic substances (many naturally occurring poisons in food are bitter). Those who are most sensitive to bitter tastes account for about 25% of the population. They are *supertasters*, people who have many more taste buds than the rest of us. Interestingly, the majority of supertasters are females, which leads scientists to postulate that there is a strong genetic and evolutionary factor involved.

Those people who do not seem to notice when something is too bitter or too salty or too sweet are believed to be non-tasters. They taste the food but not with the same intensity as supertasters. Normal tasters are the lucky ones. To them, most food is just right.

What's different about supertasters is that they have many more taste buds on their tongues than do normal tasters and nontasters. Extra taste buds mean more sensitivity to all tastes. That's why a supertaster might declare a dish too salty and a normal taster might think it was just right. (To find out if you are a super taster, log onto [www.ediblephoenix.com](http://www.ediblephoenix.com) and take the supertaster test.)

As it turns out, the healthy substances in plant foods, phytochemicals, also happen to taste bitter. They are not only safe, but offer us protection against cancer and heart disease. Usually, the more colorful a vegetable is, the greater the content of phytochemicals.

Whether you dislike vegetables because you are a supertaster or because your mother made a face when she fed them to you, there are little culinary tricks you can use to make eating vegetables more enjoyable:

- Cooking, especially in water, reduces the bitterness of vegetables like broccoli and Brussels sprouts.
- Roasting brings out the natural sugars in vegetables.
- Salt blocks bitterness, so try sprinkling veggies with a little salt before serving.
- Add a little oil (olive or canola or avocado or walnut for instance) either in cooking or in a dressing because bitter compounds are soluble in oil.
- Eat vegetables with a dip, especially one made with oil or low fat cheese.
- Add a little sugar or honey or other sweetener to trick your taste buds.
- Mix your veggies: Combine sweet baby carrots with broccoli.
- Add balsamic vinegar or raisins to greens.
- Add shredded vegetables to meat loaf to mask the flavor but still get the benefit.
- Follow the lead of the Asians—stir-fry. Quick cooking in a small amount of hot oil reduces bitterness.

Lastly, the bitter flavor of cruciferous vegetables (like broccoli, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts) intensifies with age. The fresher (and younger) the vegetable, the better the taste, so buy locally grown produce at farmers' markets for the mildest flavor. *And don't forget the spinach cookies!*

