

A Healthy Dose of Bitter with the Sweet
By LeRoy Harris
Programming & Technology Services Librarian

I hope everyone had an enjoyable Thanksgiving, or at least one that brought gratitude to mind. Delicious food, of course, has set my mind to thinking about flavors. I've decided that bitterness is a very misunderstood flavor. To be clear, I'm not talking about bitterness as an emotion. Being bitter emotionally has been linked to a number of health problems. No, I'm just talking about bitter food, the kind that leaves that strange taste in your mouth that has you questioning your ability to make good decisions. Much maligned by many a patient taking medicine, bitterness is viewed as something to be avoided. As a side note, yes, for the most part, bitter tastes are caused by a variety of chemical compounds that are very good for you. Unfortunately, medical research has shown that people can often mistake sour tastes for bitter even though the chemicals associated with each taste are quite different. Yes, bitter has a bad reputation.

Despite our aversion to bitter flavors, there are a surprising number of foods that incorporate it. Have you ever eaten raw cranberries, raw crab apples, or 100% cacao dark chocolate? Those are probably three foods people think of in relation to bitter flavor, but there are other great bitter flavors to try the world over. In China, they actually grow a relative of cucumbers that they call bitter melon. I can personally attest that it is aptly named; it is the most bitter thing I've ever tasted. Now at this point, you may be wondering what bitter has to do with the library or even more in general you might be wondering what kind of person affirms bitter foods! There's a lesson in all of this.

Have you ever wondered why old sayings don't contrast sweet and sour? They always place bitter opposite the sweet. Is it because there are so many foods that are naturally sour and sweet, like fruits? On the other hand, I can't think of any natural foods that are both bitter and sweet. Life is full of these contrasts and not just in the food we eat. These contrasts provide us experiential reference points. Would we know what sweet was if we had never tasted bitter? Could we describe happiness fully if we were never sad? Life's contrasts are an opportunity for us to observe, experience, and appreciate. The same applies to learning. There are many different teaching styles and different learning styles as well. There are different kinds of information and even different ways of presenting the same information. Here at the library, we offer you a welcoming environment to learn about and experience some of life's contrasts. You can find a book to make you grateful, outraged, laugh, cry, curious, or afraid. You could literally look for a cookbook themed around particular tastes. You can find voices that encourage or entertain. You can face questions you hadn't considered or find comfort in familiar territory.

We are grateful for the opportunity to serve you. Without our community, the library becomes just a location. But with you all, it becomes a gathering place of friends and strangers, ideas and opinions, and dreams and goals. If you're feeling adventurous and are looking for a dose of bitter with your usual choices of genre or author, why not try attending one of our monthly book clubs? It is a regular comment by people that attend

that they would not have picked that book for themselves, but they were glad they read it – even if they didn't enjoy it! A dose of bitter helps us appreciate the sweet things in life. And who knows? You may pick something expecting it to be bitter, and it turns out to be sweeter than you thought. We look forward to seeing you at the library, and you're always welcome to experiment in our kitchen of information and stories. The library is located at 17 N. Broadway and is open to the public Monday to Thursday 9:30 a.m.-8 p.m. and Friday and Saturday 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m. The library will open at 1 p.m. on Friday, December 10, so that staff can attend a morning training.