

A and demise morality



Feeding the fridge of the future



Swans and Storm Beating the odds across the border



## Real Life Food + Wine

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# Menopause without medicine

Although it has been widely used in Asian countries, only now are western women, as **Cherry Ripe** writes, beginning to discover why soy is so good

**M**ENOPAUSE cook-books? Yup. There has been a rash — perhaps that should be a (hot) flush — of them published recently. It must be all those female baby-boomers reaching a certain age.

Eating soy foods is increasingly being heralded as an alternative to hormone replacement therapy: the natural answer to menopausal symptoms. It's also offered as the explanation of why Asian women suffer fewer, if any, such symptoms (hot flashes and the like).

New Yorker Dana Jacobi, author of *Soy!*, is a big fan. Not only had she been eating quantities but, eager to spread her enthusiasm, she embarked on "benign deception": proving that anyone she cooked for could enjoy soy became a game. She had been working as a caterer, doing dinner parties on the Upper East Side, and whenever the menu called for a vegetarian main course, she'd slip in tofu. But the clincher, writes Jacobi, was suddenly discovering she was post-menopausal. It was all over. More surprisingly, it had turned out to be a non-event — "not even one hot flush. The process was barely noticeable." She began to think that the soy she had been eating might have eased her way through.

About that time, according to Jacobi, "interest in soy foods hit warp speed" following the publication of a study in 1995 which found that 47g of soy protein per day reduced cholesterol by nearly 10 per cent in just one month. Also, she writes, "soy foods appear to offer important protection against breast cancer thanks to their abundance of phytoestrogens like isoflavones, including genistein."

According to Sue Radd, a consultant nutritionist with Sanitarium, "phytoestrogens are structurally similar to the human hormone oestradiol and are thought to help balance estrogen levels in the body. People in China and Japan typically consume between 20mg and 50mg of isoflavones per day in their traditional diet, as compared to negligible amounts (less than 1mg per day) by people in western countries."

But it's not just beneficial for women. "Chinese and Japanese people following a traditional diet have very low rates of hormone-dependent diseases such as cancer of the breast, prostate, colon and rectum, as well as heart disease, when compared with the incidence of these diseases in western populations. Some short-term clinical trials indicate that soy protein



bone mineral content and bone mineral density, through the post-menopausal period." Longer studies are under way to examine the potential of soy and isoflavones for preventing osteoporosis.

"Studies around the world have found that hot flushes are less common in women who regularly eat soy products. The incidence of hot flushes in Asian women, for example, is reported to be as low as 9 per cent, while 70-80 per cent of European (and Australian) women tend to suffer from this distressing symptom."

"Interestingly, the Japanese language doesn't even have a word for 'hot flush'," says Radd, and "Japanese women tend to have the highest intake of soy foods which contain phytoestrogens."

Now comes *The Natural Estrogen Cookbook*, published early next month. Its author, Dr Lana Liew, a GP in western Sydney, was born in Malaysia, the third in a family of six children. As a child, the family would make its own soy milk (from which tofu is made) so she was very familiar with the milling process: "After drying the beans in the sun, you can crack them and easily remove the skins, which would otherwise give soy milk a bitter taste." Like many Asians, she is lactose-intolerant, meaning she avoids dairy products.

"In Asia, we used a lot of soy. My grandmother taught me a lot of the recipes." But it was Liew's medical practice that convinced her to write a cookbook. "I see patients who start menopause as early as 37 (and as late as 58) with an average age 49. In 1995 a 49-year-old



had suggested that they avoid HRT and instead eat soy. Some had suspicious breast lumps, others had pre-cancerous uterine conditions and the specialists were worried that taking synthetic estrogen might exacerbate those conditions.

"But these patients didn't know how to eat soy as recommended by the specialists. All they could see was lecithin; they didn't even know soya milk existed. So I told them it was very easy, because there were so many products in the market, and that soy was very easy to cook with. So they suggested I write some recipes for them." Liew's eldest daughter got roped into writing down the ingredients and before long, there were enough for a book.

The range of soy foods is rapidly expanding in Australian supermarkets and specialty shops. These include soybeans, tofu, tempeh, textured vegetable protein, beverages such as soy milk, soy flour, soy noodles, soy yoghurts, and many other ready-to-eat foods based on soy. However, soy sauce does not contain isoflavones.

**Growth industry:** soy milk and tofu are increasingly popular ways of gaining the benefits of soy foods

course of which she has published about 200 articles, about 10 of which were on menopause. Dumble is delighted with this trend as a way of dealing with menopause. She believes that "phytoestrogens where they can be found in food are a nice do-it-yourself approach, totally non-invasive and no regrets. It does tide women through that transition period where they can suffer a severe fall in estrogen levels, which shows up as insomnia, hot flushes, night sweats, irritability, tiredness. The propaganda from the medical side is so overwhelming, but with HRT, women often find that the so-called cure was worse than the ailment."

It's just a pity that 60 per cent of our soy beans are imported — and some of them genetically engineered beans at that.

*Soy!* by Dana Jacobi (Prima, California), \$US14 (\$21.60). *The Natural Estrogen*