

JABS & JIBES



On being a ginseng connoisseur

There is a saying in China: "Those who develop a taste for ginseng will soon be poor." My interest in ginseng began over a decade ago, as I was walking down Charing Cross Road in London. In the window of the Korean Ginseng Centre was a large bottle with a superb specimen of the human-shaped root submerged in liquid, perhaps rice wine. I remember looking at the prices of small tins of steam-cured red Korean ginseng, and walking on.

Some years later, when Traditional Chinese Medicine shops started to appear in London, I found myself on a search for liquorice root, with a side interest in the *chih* fungus of the Immortals. The *chih* fungus is reputed to be a purple mushroom that grows in caves in China, but it may be purely legendary. By ingesting it, Taoists of the Celestial Master Sect are said to be able to visit the mysterious abode of the Yellow Emperor without the aid of a flying dragon, but that's another story...

It was raining, I was standing under an umbrella outside a Chinese herbalist's in a drab London street. I had lingered too long, I could sense my heel about to turn; glancing at the fascinating dried *things* in dishes in the window I couldn't see any liquorice. Inside, an elderly Chinese woman was rushing to the door. When she asked whether I was looking for anything, I was already halfway into the shop (I think she may have been holding my elbow, as one helps a blind man across the street). "Yes", I said, forgetting about liquorice, "ginseng, do you have any ginseng root?"

A drawer that seemed to take some time to find was pulled out. I noticed at the back of the shop a crimson velvet curtain, behind which a partially obscured patient had an acupuncture needle sticking out of an arm.

Moxibustion smoke filled the air. The elderly herbalist handed me a small plastic bag with a 3-inch root in it: "American ginseng, got no Chinese ginseng, this is good, better... how many you want?" I bought three rootlets the thickness of fingers for less than £20. (American ginseng, *Panax quinquefolium*, is a different plant to the true ginseng, *Panax ginseng*. Both varieties contain ginsenosides. It was named "Panax", I believe, from "panacea".)

The herbalist advised me to break off a 1-inch length and soak it in boiling water to soften it. I will never forget eating my first inch of ginseng root. The effect was far greater than I imagined it would be; I was completely energised, I could actually *feel* the *ch'i* circulating around my body.

I once met a T'ai Ch'i master who had just come back from Korea. He had in his possession a red root of *P. ginseng* that had "only cost £250". It was then, I think, I began to become more of a connoisseur in these matters. I asked him how the circulation of *ch'i* in T'ai Ch'i compared with the effect of ginseng. "Oh", he said, and surprised me, "ginseng is much stronger".

Since my first tentative introduction to the life-enhancing properties of ginseng, I have progressed to white Chinese ginseng, which is, in my opinion, far better than red Korean ginseng of an equivalent price. I now ask for my ginseng in Chinese: "Ni you ren shen ma?" It is my ambition to sample *wild* Chinese ginseng. There are said to be only a hundred wild ginseng plants left in China. Knowledge of the sites where they grow has been passed down in families for centuries and jealously guarded from outsiders. As for the purple *chih* fungus of the Immortals, well, just don't get me onto that...

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