

# Digestive Bitters

Bitters are the American version of Europe's aperitifs and digestifs, which are herbal liquors drunk before or after meals, respectively. No matter what you call them, all digestive bitters, aperitifs, and digestifs have one thing in common, they include purely bitter herbs combined with aromatic bitter herbs infused into some kind of alcohol base. The variations of herbs you could include are virtually endless (see the book resources below-there are entire books written about them!), but quite often they contain culinary herbs because these herbs tend to be bitter and pungent in flavor.

The bitter flavor stimulates all your gastric secretions- from saliva to bile to HCl- as soon as you taste the flavor on your tongue. Purely bitter herbs are herbs that contain no essential oils and none of the pungent flavor they bring, such as Yellow Dock (*Rumex crispus*), Dandelion Lf & Rt (*Taraxacum officinale*), Artichoke Lf (*Cynara cardunculus* var. *scolymus*), and Burdock Rt (*Arctium lappa*). Aromatic bitters are herbs that have the bitter flavor but also contain essential oils (which add the pungent flavor). Aromatic bitters are generally carminative in their herbal action and bring mobility to the digestive system, moving stuck gas and alleviating bloating. They also tend to be anti-spasmodic in action as well, which helps with cramping and pain. Common aromatic bitters that are often added to bitters formulas include Rosemary, Basil, Lavender, Turmeric, Ginger, Peppermint and Spearmint, Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), Orange Peel, Cardamom, Angelica Rt (*Angelica spp*), and Chamomile (*Matricaria chamomilla*). In addition to having the bitter and pungent flavors present in a bitters formula, a true bitters should also always have a tiny bit of the sweet flavor because the body opens to the sweet taste. In the case of the formula below Fennel Sd adds the sweet flavor. Anise Sd is also commonly added in small amounts for a bit of sweet. Below is a recipe with basic ratios of purely bitter, aromatic bitters, and sweet herbs to craft your own bitters formula. And I've included my favorite bitters formula as well!

## BASIC DIGESTIVE BITTERS

Purely Bitter Herbs 1-2 parts

Aromatic Bitter Herbs 2-3 parts

Sweet Aromatic Herbs 1/4-1/2 part

Use these basic ratios to formulate your own bitters formula! You can make 1 part whatever you want, i.e. 1 tsp, 1 tbsp, 1 cup- whatever!

## FAVORITE DIGESTIVE BITTERS

Turmeric Rt 1 part  
Dandelion Rt 1 part  
Rosemary 1 part  
Orange Peel 1/2 pt  
Fennel Sd 1/4<sup>th</sup> pt  
Vodka (80-100 proof)

**DIRECTIONS:** Choose what you want 1 part to equal (i.e. 1 tsp, 1 tbsp, 1/4 cup, etc) and measure your herbs out and mix well together in a bowl. Pour into a glass jar. Cover the herbs with vodka until you have- by volume- about 2 times more vodka than you do herbs. The final ratio you are going for by volume (aka eyeballing it!) is 1 part herb: 4 parts vodka (aka your “menstruum”). Here’s how to visualize this- covering the herbs with the alcohol is taking up 2 parts because one part is what the herbs absorb and the other part is the alcohol that is filling-in the between the herbs. Then add enough vodka so that you have about twice as much alcohol as herbs. It’s ok that this isn’t exact- this is the folk method of medicine-making that doesn’t involve measurements. There are more scientific ways of measuring-out herbs too, but that’s not what we focus on in this class, although there’s certainly nothing wrong with making your medicine that way! When choosing an alcohol there are a few considerations. Vodka is often used because of its neutral flavor, but any alcohol that’s 80-100 proof (meaning it will be 40-50% alcohol- the proof number cut in half; the remaining percentage in alcohol is water) will work such as brandy, gin, rum, or whiskey. Put the lid on and let macerate (steep) at least a month, shaking daily if possible. If you forget to strain it after a month it will be fine and the herbs can actually stay in the menstruum (the liquid portion) indefinitely without going back because of alcohol’s preservative properties!

**USE:** Bitters stimulate digestive secretions and peristalsis, getting the whole digestive system ready to do its work. Nutrient assimilation is enhanced and digestive disturbances are minimized by regular use of digestive bitters. Good health really does start with great digestion, and herbal bitters are one of the best ways to tonify and strengthen your digestive system. Take 1 tsp in a small amount of water (a few ounces is enough) 5-10 minutes before major meals. It’s fine to take them after a big meal too if you forget!

## Further Resources

Herbal Medicine: Tonics, Bitters, and Digestion

By Christopher Hobbs LAc, AHG

[http://www.healthy.net/Health/Article/Tonics Bitters and Digestion/862](http://www.healthy.net/Health/Article/Tonics_Bitters_and_Digestion/862)

The Wild Medicine Solution: Healing with Aromatic, Bitter, and Tonic Plants

By Guido Mase

<http://aradicle.blogspot.com/>

Herbal Actions: Bitters

By David Hoffman

<http://www.healthy.net/scr/Article.aspx?Id=1581>

Bitters: A Spirited History of a Classic Cure-All, with Cocktails, Recipes, and Formulas

By Brad Thomas Parsons