



it smells of immortality

BY STEVE MIRSKY

My mother, who turns 39 next year (for the second time), says of her septuagenarian status, “I always wanted to look like Elizabeth Taylor. And now I do.” Not everyone is so sanguine about getting older. Some of us fight it tooth and nail, both of which looked whiter and shinier years ago. A friend of mine (really, it’s a friend, not me) has embarked on a life-extension regimen that he expects will lead to birthday cakes visible from space. My buddy gets regular aerobic exercise, avoids stress and eats a remarkably healthful diet consisting in great part of steamed vegetables. And garlic.

Garlic does indeed appear to impart a bounty of health benefits. According to published reports, garlic has proved to be good for you in more than 1,000 studies. It seems to cut the risk of various cancers; it lowers blood pressure; it wards off vampires; it lowers cholesterol; it has antifungal properties. It also richly deserves its *nom de fume*: the stinking rose.

My friend, on learning of garlic’s health-enhancing powers, replaced the apple with a clove of garlic in the old proverb regarding methods to keep the doctor away. He then extrapolated that if one clove per day was good, two or three might be even better. I saw him recently for the first time in weeks. As soon as I entered his apartment, the fragrance slammed me. As I got close to him, my eyes began to water. I instinctively (emphasis on the “instinct”) covered my nose with the back of my hand. “How many today?” I asked. “Seven!” he replied proudly. I struggled for oxygen and muttered during an exhalation, “Well, you’ll never get an infection, that’s for sure. No one’s ever going to get close enough.” Sitting in his apartment, I slowly got somewhat used to the rich bouquet that was making me a bit queasy and light-headed. I took a few sips of what I would have taken to be ordinary tap water but was in fact distilled, from his new home water distiller.

We soon left for a drive, during which we stopped at a lo-

cal natural foods store to pick up some supplies. (Apparently, I’m a health-food enabler.) While my friend wandered, presumably examining the latest in garlic presses and garlic supplements, I perused the soy goods. Years ago I wrote a story about the possible benefits of soy and convinced myself that there was enough basic research on its anticancer and cholesterol-lowering powers to make a few of the bean’s products a small part of my diet. I spotted and bought some soy-based vegetarian pepperoni. A few hours later I adulterated a perfectly respectable slice of Bronx-made Sicilian-style pizza with thin slices of same soy. Though not terrible, it wasn’t real pepperoni. And it probably won’t happen again.

After stopping at my house for a while, we prepared to get back in the car. I then noticed that he had never taken off a pair of thin glove liners while in my home. Now, I admit to being a lousy housekeeper—like nature, I abhor a vacuum—but I don’t think the place is actually dangerous. “You don’t want to touch anything here, do you?” I asked. He said, “No, I’m just chilly,” which may be true now that his body-fat levels are down to the point where even his nerve cells are probably losing their insulation. But the sheepish grin on his face convinced me that at least part of the issue might be mysophobia (which sounds like fear of soy soup but is actually dread of germs). “Listen,” I said, “I have one question. How you gonna keep those gloves on when your fingernails are two inches long, Howard Hughes?”

My friend could have the last laugh. I may be long dead when he is still steaming broccoli, distilling water and, of course, gobbling garlic. But I figure, based on genes and my more moderate but still relatively healthy lifestyle, that I have a solid 85 years in store, maybe more. And I swear to you, a good slice of Bronx-made Sicilian pizza really is to die for.

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