"No, we don’t carry MSG in this store. It’s neurotoxic and too many people are allergic." When I pressed her a little further, the helpful health-food store attendant turned from courteous to chilly. I backed off and left politely. I wasn’t going to let monosodium glutamate (MSG) stress my day. Or hers. MSG is definitely not popular at that end of the mall. Is there a reason?

In China it’s called "the king of seasons" and alternately, "gourmet powder." In Japan where the average consumption per person is about a kilogram annually, MSG is a "fifth flavor" after salt, sweet, bitter and sour. A flavor enhancer it truly is. "Unami" they call it in Tokyo. We might translate that as "savory." And our Asian friends can’t understand why we Americans shun it.

Just what is this food substance that it should be avoided like arsenic? Let’s start with glutamate, an amino acid, a building block for our body proteins; and which occurs naturally in many proteins that we use as foods. MSG is a salt of glutamate. Years ago it was taken from seaweed, a natural protein-rich food. More recently, it is derived through fermentation, beginning with starch, molasses or beets. Our bodies use it just as they do the glutamate of tomatoes or mushrooms and a thousand other foods.

Enter the "Chinese Restaurant Syndrome." This is what one physician called the "inner body-burning" endured by him and others after eating Chinese food that had been liberally laced with MSG. Lightheadedness, chest distress and maybe headache have made their way into the syndrome. Wonton soup anyone?

Once upon a time, glutamic acid was awarded the distinction of being brain food; a promoter of intelligence. Nice try but it probably doesn’t work like that. Indeed, glutamate is blocked by the blood-brain barrier and when eaten doesn’t get near the neurons. By the powers of natural metabolism we make about 1.5 ounces each day, and yes, MSG is a neurotransmitter. This places it in good company with the likes of matchless serotonin, and that’s a plus for MSG. But neurotoxicity, the word used by the lady in the store? Not likely. Indeed, The FDA and the National Academy of Sciences give it a clean bill of health. Not surprisingly, for it is among the most extensively researched substances ever. And always it emerges as safe, along with savory.

But wait, what about allergies? No, say the allergists. Sensitivities then? Yes, certainly! Studies suggest that less than one in 100 of us are sensitive to MSG. Like in egg-flower soup. Adverse food reactions are common whether it be strawberries, peanuts or whatever. Persons who believe that they are sensitive to MSG must be alert to what’s on their plates. If MSG has been added to a processed food it is listed as "monosodium glutamate." Listing is mandatory, federally proscribed. You can depend on it.
Why use MSG at all? Answer: it’s a flavor enhancer that brings out the best in many of the foods that we love to eat. It’s a comestibles good friend.

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