

Sawbones 165: Ginger

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Clint: Sawbones is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour, and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

Justin:

Hello, everybody, and welcome to Sawbones, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your cohost, Justin Tyler McElroy.

Sydnee:

And I'm Sydnee Smirl McElroy.

Justin:

Trying to make this sound a little more professional, you know? More profes—

Sydnee:

Formerly Sydnee Ann McElroy.

Justin:

No.

Sydnee:

Smirl.

Justin:

There you go.

Sydnee:

Sydnee Ann Smirl—

Justin:

There you go.

Sydnee:

... McElroy.

Justin:

Never.

Sydnee:

Dump the Ann, got... Why is this relevant?

Justin:

We're just trying to sound more professional.

Sydnee:

Oh.

Justin:

Sydnee, the holidays are here again, and, uh, as Tom Petty would say, it's—

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

... Christmas all over again.

Sydnee:

Is that what Tom Petty says?

Justin:

Yeah. If you listen to the lyrics of that song, it's a little bit cynical. I just listened to it for the first time. It's a little... it seems a little cynical to me, but anyway.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

It's a... it's kinda, like, a world-weary, like, "Oh, Christmas is here again." Like, that was my Tom Petty.

Sydnee:

That... that's pretty much what he sounds like.

Justin:

Yeah, I get him, Dylan. Anyway—

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

... this is the... Christmas time is here again, and, uh, that, at the McElroy house, means, one, Sydnee, uh, uh, purchased three snowmen that blare Jingle Bells 24 hours a day outside our dining room window.

Sydnee:

They're, they're inflatable... Charlie loves inflatables. They... she calls 'em her buddies, and this one, it's an inflatable that a—... uh, lights up and plays Jingle Bells, and it lights up to the Jingle Bells. Like, it's synchronized—

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... to the music. It's very loud, and it is outside, and I apologize. I'm taking this moment to apologize to our neighbors [laughs]—

Justin:

Yeah, sorry about that, gang.

Sydnee:

... for purchasing this item.

Justin:

Sorry about our entire first floor of our home, which is permeated with the, the echoes of Jingle Bells.

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm.

Justin:

Um, anyway, the other thing it means is, uh, just baking, baking up a storm. We realized we hadn't had cookies, and then we just, like, made... I made some coconut—

Sydnee:

You did.

Justin:

... chocolate chip—

Sydnee:

I can't take credit.

Justin:

... cookies and then some, uh, just some peanut butter cookies, like, four-ingredient peanut butter cookies 'cause we realized that Charlie doesn't like chocolate, so we've just been making cookies. Um, b—

Sydnee:

Justin's quite the baker.

Justin:

Thanks.

Sydnee:

You are. It's true. Yeah, you're very good at baking. It stresses me out sometimes because you're a, a perfectionist baker.

Justin:

Little bit, yeah.

Sydnee:

And you get very upset if it's not going as planned.

Justin:

There's no room for anything else in baking as far as I'm concerned—

Sydnee:

Sure.

Justin:

But anyway. Um—

Sydnee:

You know what you haven't made, though?

Justin:

A what?

Sydnee:

You haven't made any gingerbread.

Justin:

That's true, Sydnee. I—

Sydnee:

Ever, to my recollection.

Justin:

Yeah, that's true. I know it's traditional. I just am not a big... I don't know. I've never been a big, like, gingerbread kinda person. I guess I could give it a whirl.

Sydnee:

I guess I always think of it as kind of hard.

Justin:

It's a little bit hard and not very pleasant to eat.

Sydnee:

But to be fair, that is because my only experience was at... well, I mean, I've eaten gingerbread cookies before, I guess, but primarily, it's just as a building material—

Justin:

Yeah, right.

Sydnee:

... used for construction work. [laughs]

Justin:

That I b—... just becomes inevitably... Gingerbread houses are the worst. We're... can we just... I know we wanna talk about... I'm assuming... ginger.

Sydnee:

I'm gonna talk about ginger.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Okay.

Justin:

Before we do that, um, gingerbread houses are the worst. You bring something into your home that looks, like, so delectable—

Sydnee:

Uh-huh.

Justin:

... and then you say, "I can't eat you. You're a decoration."

Sydnee:

Don't eat this.

Justin:

And then, it's December 26th, and you're like, "What's up?"

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

"Uh, [laughs] guess what. You're not a decoration anymore. Now, you're consu— consumable," and it's inedible.

Sydnee:

No, it's not a consumable.

Justin:

It's... no. It's no longer—

Sydnee:

I know. It's not.

Justin:

No, and it... no, it's just to be thrown away. It's a nightmare.

Sydnee:

There are nibbles off of our gingerbread house, though.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

I'm assuming that was Charlie, though.

Justin:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Is that you? Are you slowly eating the house?

Justin:

That was the only thing I could think of is if I slowly ate it...

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Then, it would, like... that was the only way I could strike back.

Sydnee:

Are you, are you slowly, sneakily eating Charlie's gingerbread house?

Justin:

Because, if I do it slow, she won't notice.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

It's just sitting out there.

Sydnee:

She's gonna notice.

Justin:

She's not gonna notice.

Sydnee:

She's gonna.

Justin:

I'll blame her.

Sydnee:

I'm gonna tell her—

Justin:

She's two—

Sydnee:

... that daddy did it.

Justin:

She's two and a quarter. She doesn't know what she did. I— I'll tell her she did it. She'll buy, and—

Sydnee:

She doe—she remembers everything.

Justin:

Uh, so what's the deal with ginger, Sydnee? I know that—

Sydnee:

Well—

Justin:

... I have my things that I rely on ginger for, but what's—

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Give me, like, the, the full scope.

Sydnee:

Well, thank you to Catherine, and Stephanie, and Sean for recommending this topic. Um, ginger, obviously, has some medical... I was gonna say uses, but I mean, there's... I guess there are some medicinal uses and then things that it is used for that are thought to be medical. How about that? Was that a—

Justin:

Maybe medical applications—

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

... because application implies that it is being applied but not that it is useful.

Sydnee:

But that... not that it is doing anything. Uh, ginger, the plant, the name we're talking about here is, uh, zingiber officinale.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

I like zingiber.

Justin:

Zingiber.

Sydnee:

Uh, I like that.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

I kinda wish we just called ginger that.

Justin:

Yeah. I can see why that would be a mouthful, though.

Sydnee:

Yeah, it comes... uh, actually, the word ginger comes from the Middle English gingivere.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

Just the word for it. There you go in case you wondered.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

I like that better, too, but it dates back, like, 3,000 years, originally from a, Sanskrit word that meant horn root because, if you look at the root o—... you know, the edible part, the part that we use in medicine and in—

Justin:

Mm. Looks like a horn. Yeah.

Sydnee:

But it looks like a horn, right? You... did you know that ginger no longer grows in the wild?

Justin:

What?

Sydnee:

Did not know this. Fascinating.

Justin:

Really? Anywhere?

Sydnee:

Gi—we, we are not entirely certain where ginger first grew in the wild. Certainly, it did at some point, uh, probably somewhere in Southeast Asia, but it ha—it does not grow wild anymore. It is now only cultivated.

Justin:

Weird.

Sydnee:

Uh, it is cultivated many places. Um, like, it dates back to ancient China. It was cultivated in India for a very long time, and then it has spread from there and is now grown many other places in the world, but ginger does not grow wild.

Justin:

I did not know that. That's wild.

Sydnee:

I didn't know that either. Uh, it is the member of the same family as turmeric and cardamom, turmeric which is also something we could do a whole show on 'cause it has medical applications as well.

Justin:

May get to that point.

Sydnee:

Yeah, I... I'm sure we will. Uh, there is a legend that a baker on the island of Rhodes made the first gingerbread in 2,400 BCE.

Justin:

Wow.

Sydnee:

And it dates back—

Justin:

Probably pretty stale by now.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

[laughs] Classic.

Sydnee:

Then, he made it into a house—

Justin:

Classic.

Sydnee:

... just to torture Justin. Uh, the Egyptians and the Romans did make gingerbread. We know that, so this is... that application for ginger is, is very old, and ginger was very important for trading.

Justin:

Oh, really?

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm. It was a... it was highly prized, like, uh, along the Silk Road. It was, it was a highly prized spice. A lot of spices were, but ginger was, was among the most. It was, uh, sent to the Roman Empire, often traded through that route, um, largely for medicinal purposes, uh, in that time. Um, but it was also widely used for flavoring because ginger, it's, it's a strong flavor, kind of a spicy—

Justin:

Very spicy—

Sydnee:

... flavor.

Justin:

... flavor.

Sydnee:

And it's very good at disguising the taste of [laughing] preserved meat, which I also took to mean disguising the taste—

Justin:

Of rotten meat—

Sydnee:

... of rotten meat. [laughs]

Justin:

... is what you meant to say, yes, because—

Sydnee:

Me—

Justin:

... it is 2,400 BC.

Sydnee:

Meat that was intended to be preserved but maybe has gone a little rogue.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

You could put ginger in a lot of things. It would probably hide some—

Justin:

Yeah, you could get some s—

Sydnee:

... some rogue flavors.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Uh, I read that Cleopatra gave it to Mark Antony in a... there was a beverage that she made with nutmeg, and mace, and ginger, and it was thought... it is thought that perhaps this was being used as an aphrodisiac.

Justin:

Oh, okay.

Sydnee:

Which makes sense.

Justin:

It's spicy.

Sydnee:

Spicy.

Justin:

Spic it up.

Sydnee:

Warm.

Justin:

Spice things up, yeah.

Sydnee:

Uh, in ancient times, there's also... I've also read that it was used for, uh, bathing new babies. It was thought to be—

Justin:

Ugh.

Sydnee:

... like... well, like, you mix some ginger and water and give your baby a bath in it.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

So, not, like, a ton of ginger, but it was thought to fight aging, and preserve youth, and kinda beautify the skin, like—

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... give you a glow, so—

Justin:

It feels like a bit of a panacea.

Sydnee:

Uh, we're getting to that, yeah.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Now, Hippocrates wrote about ginger. Um, uh, of course, we're kind of gonna be referencing the humeral system of medicine, the four humors, which Hippocrates—

Justin:

Blood, bile—

Sydnee:
Mm-hmm.

Justin:
... phlegm...

Sydnee:
You got it.

Justin:
... and black...

Sydnee:
Bile.

Justin:
... bile.

Sydnee:
There's two kinds of bile.

Justin:
Black bile.

Sydnee:
So, you g—I mean, blood, bile, phlegm, just divide bile up into—

Justin:
Got it.

Sydnee:
Yeah. Ex—see, you're good.

Justin:
Yeah.

Sydnee:
You have learned the humeral system of medicine, which has zero application to today's modern medicine.

Justin:

Okay, smart aleck. Move on.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Uh, Hippocrates thought of ginger as a dry, warming herb, and that's, that's because a lot of, uh, your, your purpose as a medical practitioner back then was to balance these four humors by, if you had too much of a cold humor, giving you something warm, or too much of something wet in your body, it would give you something dry, and—

Justin:

All, all balanced, trying to find balance.

Sydnee:

Exactly. Exactly. So, if you had a cold condition, especially a cold, wet condition, ginger would be a good treatment for it. It would stimulate your metabolism, stimulate your liver. Uh, in this way, it would evaporate excess fluid and phlegm, so if you had something that was, uh, thought to produce a lot of phlegm, if, if you were found to have a... an overabundance of phlegm, ginger would be good for that.

Justin:

I feel like the... that makes sense to me. I could see where you would get, like... 'cause I think it has that real strong bite to it. Like, ginger or stuff like capsaicin, like, definitely has, like, a... capsaic—no, that's not the right word. You know, st—

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Hot stuff.

Sydnee:

Yeah, you're, you're right.

Justin:

Capsaicin, okay.

Sydnee:

Capsaicin. Mm-hmm.

Justin:

Like, hot stuff definitely has that sense that you're... that that has been cleared out.

Sydnee:

That you're opening up your sinuses.

Justin:

Yeah, exactly.

Sydnee:

Yeah, I think that's probably where some of this came from, that, that sensation you get if you eat a, a lot of raw ginger.

Justin:

Wasabi.

Sydnee:

Yeah, wasabi does that, too. Uh, it could be... it was also thought it could be sort of expectorating the phlegm, so, like, breaking up the phlegm and helping you cough it out, and so—

Justin:

So, it's especially... you would say it's especially good at expectorating?

Sydnee:

[laughs] My, what a guy, that ginger.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Uh, cold conditions were largely things that you... I mean, this kinda fits, cold, flu, bronchitis, sinusitis, you know, respiratory conditions.

Justin:

Sure, yeah.

Sydnee:

Any kind of pulmonary issue, gout for... that's a cold condition, same idea. Ginger woulda been used for that. Uh, so, so it was a very popular herb, so to speak in the, in the Hippocratic medicinal cabinet.

Justin:

I wonder what... uh, we're probably not talking about crystallized, right? Like, we probably weren't to that point yet.

Sydnee:

No, uh, the practice of preserving and crystallizing and all the different ways you can, you can use ginger came along later.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Not too much later, though. We, we figured out all the different ways to use ginger pretty soon, but at this time, we're probably talking more about either the raw root or powdered—

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... powdered forms of it, drying it out and—

Justin:

Yeah, yeah.

Sydnee:

... grinding it down. Um, but also just there were lots of applications that involved, like, the, like, chopping up the raw ginger very, very fine. Eventually, obviously, we found ways of preserving it, and you'll see, like, preserved ginger, like the pink ginger that comes with your sushi.

Justin:

Sure, yeah.

Sydnee:

That's, like, a form of preserved ginger.

Justin:

Pickling? That's pickling, right?

Sydnee:

Yeah, pickling, and then, like, um, uh, cry—like you mentioned, crystallized ginger and drying... dried ginger and all that kinda stuff.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Initial applications were more the powder or the, the raw root. Uh, Pliny did not... our buddy Pliny, Pliny the Elder did not write a lot about ginger.

Justin:

Let us down.

Sydnee:

Unfortunately, other than to say that he really liked the smell, and a lot of people seemed to use it.

Justin:

That's such a [laughing]... that's a... "So, here's my c—here comes my—"

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

... "chapter on ginger that everybo—" He had to be a few books in, right, at that point? He's like, "What should I write about? Uh—"

Sydnee:

Just tired.

Justin:

"Ginger, okay. Um, I don't use it. I like the smell. A lot of other people use it. Anyway, next chapter."

Sydnee:

It's actually in a chapter that's not even about ginger. It's about pepper, and he starts to talk about how some people confuse pepper and ginger, but ginger's definitely something else, and ginger is definitely something people use and smells good, but not pepper, and then he goes on to talk more about pepper.

Justin:

So, if you're, if you're wondering how Pliny did so well, remember he lived in an era where people confused pepper and ginger.

Sydnee:

[laughs] "They're spicy. I don't know."

Justin:

"Spicy, end with E-R. I don't know."

Sydnee:

[laughs] And in ancient Indian medicine, I... it was also used for gout, just like it was in Greek medicine, uh, as well as for indigestion, uh, and for elephantiasis.

Justin:

Elephantiasis, really?

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm.

Justin:

That's a... that's an odd—

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

... application of it 'cause it seems like that'd be pretty... I'm always confused when I hear about, like, anything exterior being treated with this stuff 'cause, like, you do that once, right?

Sydnee:

And it doesn't work.

Justin:

And it doesn't work, and you're just like, "Well, that definitely was made up."
[laughs] Like, "We, we... hey, should we write this down? [laughing] We came up with one. Maybe ginger for elephantiasis. Should we write it down?"

Sydnee:

Sure. Write it down.

Justin:

It was like, "Did you try it?"

"No, I didn't try it."

"Well, try it real quick."

"Okay, no. Never mind. [laughing] We probably... let's go ahead and write it down 'cause we already... I don't know. We don't have a lot of ink 'cause [laughing] it's olden times, and we already wrote it, and I don't wanna scratch it out, but, like, that one is... that one's a bust."

Sydnee:

This—

Justin:

[laughs] "Let's... in the next edition..."

Sydnee:

Just say it enough. It was somebody who sold ginger who made that up.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

No, it... but we know this from, from doing Sawbones is that just because something didn't work, it doesn't mean we—

Justin:

Doesn't mean it didn't work.

Sydnee:

It [laughs] doesn't mean that we didn't try it over, and over, and over, and believe in it really hard, and keep advising it to this day.

Justin:

There isn't a cure for elephantiasis, is there? Like, there's not a treatment for that, right?

Sydnee:

It de—it depends.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

It depends on what the cause... I mean—

Justin:

That seems like a longer conversation.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

This is a longer conversation.

Justin:

Fair enough.

Sydnee:

It's not ginger, can I say that?

Justin:

It ain't ginger.

Sydnee:

It's not ginger. It was, it was called the great medicine and the universal cure. Eeh.

Justin:

Yeah. Really?

Sydnee:

Which we... we're already suspect of that. In traditional Chinese medicine, it was and, and continues to be advised for conditions of the spleen, the lung, the stomach, and then also for thinning mucus again. Uh, it was, as I mentioned, it was a very important trade commodity, and in the 13th and 14th century, you could trade a, a pound of ginger for the same cost as a sheep [laughs], so there's your reference point.

Justin:

Wow.

Sydnee:

It cost exactly one sheep unit.

Justin:

One... it's... how many is it?

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

It's a sheep.

Sydnee:

It's a sheep. It costs—

Justin:

It's a sheep—

Sydnee:

... a sheep.

Justin:

... per pound.

Sydnee:

So, that... I think that's expensive?

Justin:

Seems expensive.

Sydnee:

I mean, that's a whole, like, animal life.

Justin:

I mean, yeah, and, like, you can do whatever you want with it. It's your sheep.

Sydnee:

Ooh, careful.

Justin:

I mean, not anything.

Sydnee:

No, careful.

Justin:

I mean, get your head out of the gutter, Smirl.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Don't do anything you want with it. How 'bout just pet it and keep it—

Justin:

Pet it and keep it as a beloved pet, yeah.

Sydnee:

Keep it as a beloved... name it, pet it, and feed it.

Justin:

Just, yeah.

Sydnee:

Not ginger, though.

Justin:

Just have a sheep.

Sydnee:

It probably won't like that. Uh—

Justin:

You don't have your ginger anymore. [laughing] You traded it.

Sydnee:

[laughing] You traded it for the sheep.

Justin:

It's the worst gift of the magi ever.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

"This sheep loves ginger. I've, I've gone terribly wrong. Oh, no."

Sydnee:

[laughs] "And I got you a ginger holder."

Justin:

"Oh, Henry."

Sydnee:

[laughs] In, uh, in medieval times, this is when we see more and more forms of preserved ginger, especially being used in sweets.

Justin:

'Cause you know the next time you want ginger, you're gonna look at that sheep and just think, "Man..."

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

"I could really use some ginger right now. The... I'm so upset with my—"

Sydnee:

"But I traded all my ginger."

Justin:

"I traded all my ginger for you."

Sydnee:

[laughs] "And now, I can't use 'em in sweets."

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

Uh, this is, this is when we see... you know, we... we've already kinda talked about gingerbread, and especially... I mean, i— in all different kinds of desserts, ginger could be employed, um, but specifically, Elizabeth I invented the gingerbread man at this point in history. At the time,

gingerbread was already being eaten kind of as, like, a... as, uh, the hard cookie that was think about—

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... like a, you know, gingerbread cookie. Uh, but it w—and it was already in the shape of other things, so people would commonly make gingerbread into the shape of animals or just some kind of object and decorate it for various reasons. Uh, there, there were actually big medieval fairs, uh, and over time, these medieval fairs became known as gingerbread fairs because it was so common to eat gingerbread at them.

Justin:

I get very suspicious whenever I read, uh, historical stories of, um, royalty inventing things 'cause it seems to me... it's like—

Sydnee:

You think they were stealing the credit?

Justin:

"Your Majesty, I've created something, amazing. It's a gingerbread man."

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

And she's like, "Oh, you invented it? Did you? 'Cause I'm pretty sure I invented it."

Sydnee:

"Off with his head."

Justin:

"Off with his head. I invented gingerbread men."

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

"It's my thing now. Anybody else wanna disagree?"

"No, not at all, no, my queen. You invented it. No."

Sydnee:

I bet you're right on this. I don't know. I don't know. I'm not... I don't wanna argue with history, but I bet you're right on this one because what... the... where the gingerbread man came... 'cause we already have gingerbread. We already have gingerbread cookies. We have them in different shapes. They're a, they're a deli—they're considered, like, this delight, this delicacy—

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... or not delicacy but, like, this celebration kind of thing. You would have them at a fair. You would have them on holidays. They had, like, all different kinds of seasons, you know, that you could, you could decorate them for different seasons. The gingerbread man, initially, were gingerbread dignitaries. It was... Queen Elizabeth would welcome different dignitaries into her court, and to celebrate their arrival, she would have cookies made that looked like them.

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

So, here's... I don't know... a king of France cookie. I don't know, whatever dignitary was coming to visit. "Here's a cookie that looks like you," and that was the first, like, gingerbread person.

Justin:

She sounds like a I'll-fated Silicon Valley upstart. [laughing] Like, it sounds like...

Sydnee:

"Welcome. Do you wanna impress your important guests?"

Justin:

"Impress your important guests with this out-of-the-box gift."

Sydnee:

"Make 'em into a cookie." The cookies at the gingerbread fairs, by the way, were called fairings. I've never heard of that term. It also led to a couple expressions, uh, take the guilt off the gingerbread—

Justin:

Ah, yes.

Sydnee:

... because it so commonly would use, like, gold leaf on your ginger... your fancy gingerbread cookies—

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... so you could... that was an expression that was used, um, as well as the... you know, the intricate work on houses that, as... have you ever heard of gingerbread work?

Justin:

No.

Sydnee:

Like, on the site... like, on the—

Justin:

Oh, I get where it's coming from—

Sydnee:

You know the roof of houses—

Justin:

... but I've never heard the term.

Sydnee:

You know what I'm talking about?

Justin:

I don't... yeah.

Sydnee:

Uh, because of all this—

Justin:

I don't have a lot of conversations in my day to day that would lead me into house construction, actually.

Sydnee:

I bet Chris knows this term.

Justin:

Yeah, I'm sure.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Anyway, gingerbread work came from that, and then, um, gingerbread houses came along in Germany in the 16th century just because people were getting super creative with gingerbread.

Justin:

I wanna hear more about gingerbread... ginger as medicine, though.

Sydnee:

I'm getting to that, but first, why don't we go to the billing department?

Justin:

Let's go.

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

Justin:

So, you're... we're talking about gingerbread, and it made me very hungry, uh, but I wanna talk a little bit more about ginger as medicine.

Sydnee:

So, you're right. As I mentioned, I got on this sidebar because I found this history of gingerbread men, and gingerbread people, and dignitaries—

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... quite interesting, but, uh, yes, alongside of all these wonderful food uses, they... there were more and more ways that people were using ginger as medicine, um, especially as we began to find different ways to, to preserve it and then add it to other things.

So in the Middle Ages, we started adding it to syrup. So, ginger in, in different kinds of syrups is a better way to ingest more ginger, uh, partially 'cause it tasted good and then other, other medicinal concoctions as well. In addition, it was also added to beer at this point.

Justin:

Mm.

Sydnee:

Ginger beer.

Justin:

But not ginger beer.

Sydnee:

Ginger beer, ginger in beer.

Justin:

That's not ginger... no, ginger beer is not—

Sydnee:

Ginger in beer.

Justin:

No, just 'cause Sam Adams—

Sydnee:

I thought ginger beer came from... I mean—

Justin:

Just 'cause Sam Adams has something called g—this makes me so angry. I can't talk about it.

Sydnee:

In the 16th century, probably a very important medical application, it was used against plague. Uh, Henry VIII actually, uh, routinely ingested a ginger-based concoction to try to avoid the plague.

Justin:

What I'm saying is they have a thing in their holiday box called ginger beer.

Sydnee:

I know, and it's not ginger beer, which, is it different?

Justin:

That's not ginger... you can't just put ginger in beer and call it ginger beer. That's not what it is!

Sydnee:

You also can't use ginger against the plague unless you wanna get the plague because—

Justin:

That—

Sydnee:

... it will not work. [laughs]

Justin:

I... so, yeah, I guess we're in agreement. [laughs]

Sydnee:

Uh, the, uh, the... on a side note, at this point in history, we're kinda moving into where the colonists would've been migrating to the New World.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Do you know they, they brought gingerbread there, and one way it was used in early American history was to influence voters in elections?

Justin:

No, I did not know that.

Sydnee:

Yes. I thought that was an interesting sidebar. Gingerbread was a very popular way to... I would've... like, if you're trying to influence my vote, I don't know that a gingerbread cookie is gonna win me.

Justin:

If you're very on the fence. [laughs]

Sydnee:

Okay. [laughs]

Justin:

"I don't really like either of these candidates. What do you got?"

Sydnee:

Just rampant disregard for the future of your country. I guess then a gingerbread cookie could push you either way, but, uh, it has... Now, how was it being used as medicine? So, now we've got all these different preparations of ginger. We're gonna put it in syrup. We're putting it in beer. We're putting it in all our food. It is being used largely for stomach conditions. Nausea, sea sickness, morning sickness, and that dates back a really long time.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Still is today advised for those. But it was also... ginger, as I mentioned before, it... back to ancient times, we would bathe new babies in it, and it was thought to fight aging, so it was also used for a lot skin conditions. In general, it was thought that if you just mixed it with some kind of oil, olive oil, coconut oil, any kinda oil you wanted to, and then applied it to your skin, you'd have a more... like, a glowing complexion.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Just like a, you know, standard kinda beauty thing. Uh, if you mixed it with molasses, you could apply it on your skin for hives.

Justin:

Mm.

Sydnee:

It was thought to kind of have an anti-inflammatory effect in that sense. Uh, you could take fresh or powdered ginger, so if... ideally, you would have powdered ginger for this one, and you would sprinkle it on, like, if you have a boil, an abscess.

Justin:

Oh, okay.

Sydnee:

... some sort of skin infection, and it would help, uh, draw it out was the thought. It would open it up and allow it to drain. If you don't have powdered ginger, you [laughing] can just take fresh ginger and mix it w— again, with some kinda oil or maybe mustard—

Justin:

Ech, okay.

Sydnee:

... like, big chunks of raw ginger—

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

... and then just, like, shove it on the boil or in the boil—

Justin:

No. Stop it.

Sydnee:

... and then have it open.

Justin:

No.

Sydnee:

I don't know.

Justin:

Don't do any of this.

Sydnee:

I wouldn't do that especially... I mean, now, like, there... we... there are doctors for this sort of thing. Uh, ginger and honey was a common combination advised for anything that was thought to come from your gall bladder. Uh, you're having gall bladder problems.

Justin:

Kinda a long shot, but sure.

Sydnee:

Here's some ginger and honey.

Justin:

Sure. Nobody even knows what a gall bladder is.

Sydnee:

And [laughs]... well, I mean, I do.

Justin:

Mm.

Sydnee:

Mm.

Justin:

Mm-hmm. I won't make you prove it.

Sydnee:

In addition, we begin to see this expansion of it being used for other medical conditions. So, uh, does your baby have colic?

Justin:

Yes.

Sydnee:

Give him some ginger. Uh, do you have any irritable bowel or loss of appetite? Ginger.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

It was thought to stimulate the metabolism, stimulate the appetite, make your bowels work better. Uh, if you've got any... again, we talked about the cold conditions, cough, bronchitis, cold, flu, chills—

Justin:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... anything like that, poor circulation. Maybe you've got menstrual cramps. Do you have stomach cramps? Do you have fever? Do you have headache? How 'bout a toothache?

Justin:

Well, Sydnee—

Sydnee:

It's also really good for inflammation, so do you—

Justin:

You're not done.

Sydnee:

... have some arthritis? Do you have some joint problems, maybe some rheumatism, maybe a little bit of tendonitis? It's also good for lowering your cholesterol, and lowering your blood pressure, and it prevents blood clots.

Justin:

Are you done?

Sydnee:

I'm done.

Justin:

Uh, that sounds like a cure-all to me, Sydnee, and as we have [laughing] well established on Sawbones, cure-alls cure nothing.

Sydnee:

Cure nothing. Yeah, unfortunately, ginger, I think a, a lot of it—

Justin:

Don't say it does cure things—

Sydnee:

No.

Justin:

... 'cause that's gonna mess up the whole bit.

Sydnee:

There's a little bit you can use ginger for, and I'm about to get to that, but I, I think that when you have something like ginger, which, as we've already mentioned, has a strong flavor, a strong odor, if you eat more, it's kinda spicy... I mean, it's not spicy, but you know, it's kind of a spicy s—

Justin:

Kinda spicy flavor, yeah.

Sydnee:

... it, it feels stimulating.

Justin:

Yeah, it feels like you're getting some pep, some—

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

... vim, some vigor—

Sydnee:

Exactly.

Justin:

... some zest, some zeal.

Sydnee:

So, you see it used for, for that kind of thing. Um, and then, uh, uh, even up till today, we still, especially for GI issues, so for stomach issues, for nausea, we still commonly recommend ginger. Now, that—

Justin:

I used it for gas.

Sydnee:

For gas?

Justin:

Yeah, remember? Do you remember, actually, when we were—

Sydnee:

Yes.

Justin:

You remember when you were living in that, uh, dorm, that, uh... the... not the dorm, but the university apartments—

Sydnee:

Yep.

Justin:

... the chalets, I think—

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm.

Justin:

... was, and you m—I had really bad stomach pain, and you made me, uh, basically, a shot glass full of lemon juice and ginger?

Sydnee:

Yes.

Justin:

Yes.

Sydnee:

'Cause you read about it online.

Justin:

I read about it online, and you mixed it up for me.

Sydnee:

I did it.

Justin:

I'll, I'll be darned if it didn't work wonders.

Sydnee:

I wasn't in medical school yet.

Justin:

That's true. You were a little, a little bit more flexible. [laughs]

Sydnee:

[laughs] I will say this, uh, kinda skipping ahead a little bit. It does... in some cases, it has been proven to help with nausea.

Justin:

Boom.

Sydnee:

So, I mean, it... but that's... it's been specific. It's hard because they do a study on, you know, morning sickness, versus sea sickness, versus nausea related to, you know, it may be drug-induced, like, chemotherapy nausea versus nausea because you've got, you know, a, a gastrointestinal virus or something. I mean, there are different kinds of nausea, so it doesn't work on all nausea, not necessarily, but can it help with nausea? Is it pretty harmless to try a little bit of ginger when you have some nausea? Nah. It's fine.

Justin:

Why do I always want ginger ale when I'm on a plane, and everybody feels this way?

Sydnee:

Well—

Justin:

My friend, uh, the dear departed Ryan Davis, used to call it sky ale for that exact reason.

Sydnee:

I think part of it is... I don't know that I would say that there is enough ginger in a ginger ale to actually settle your stomach.

Justin:

Mm. Okay.

Sydnee:

I don't know that I would, I would make that claim.

Justin:

It's a little bit of a psychosomatic.

Sydnee:

I, I think part of it is the... yes, I think part of it is our association that ginger ale settles our stomach, and again, there have been some studies that say ginger does help with nausea, so I'm not saying that's not true, but I think part of it is the association. Part of it is also it's not just knowing that ginger ale, that thought that ginger ale's gonna help nausea, but the taste then, you know, because, I mean, we're sensory creatures—

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

... the smell, the taste, the... our association with it. Maybe all that helps to calm you, also your anxiety about getting ill. I don't know, but I mean, it can help with nausea some. Um, it also is, is... still, there are, there are people who will tell you ginger helps with high blood pressure, but it's funny because the same people who will tell you it helps with high blood pressure will tell you that, if you eat too much, it will cause high blood pressure and also not to eat it in the summer 'cause that's when it will make your high blood pressure the worst.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

And that—

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

Obviously, there... that's problematic.

Justin:

I'm already walking away from the conversation. [laughs]

Sydnee:

I have read that it's good with hiccups, but we've talked about hiccups before. Everything is supposedly good for hiccups—

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... because hiccups tend to go away. So, something's gonna be the last thing you tried, right?

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Uh, there was one really strange application of ginger that I had never heard of and that I am, unfortunately, now aware of called gingering with horses.

Justin:

What is that?

Sydnee:

Have you heard of this? This is terrible. So, ginger, if applied to the skin, especially to a mucus membrane, can be kind of irritating, like a chemical irritant, you know? I mean, you could, i—you could imagine how ginger could feel that way. It does it on, like, your fingers.

Justin:

Yeah, I could see that.

Sydnee:

But, yeah, it, it could be... just raw ginger maybe even inside your mouth probably wouldn't feel too good. So, it's been used as a suppository on horses. Um, you can either apply it rectally or vaginally, uh, for the—

Justin:

Oh.

Sydnee:

And this practice is called gingering, and it will make your horse appear younger or livelier, make their—

Justin:

That's usually unpleasant.

Sydnee:

... their tails stand up more or somethi—I don't know. It does something to the horse to... if you're trying to compete with the horse or sell the horse—

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... to falsely lead people to see the hor—it's a terrible thing. It's not okay. You're not supposed to do this. They, actually, in competitive horse events, they actually will swab... if they're... if they suspect gingering, they can swab for ginger—

Justin:

In the—

Sydnee:

... to test... yeah, in the—

Justin:

Mm, mm, mm, mm, mm, mm.

Sydnee:

... rectum or whatever. This is a terrible thing.

Justin:

That's a coooooool gig.

Sydnee:

I'd never heard of this, and I can't—

Justin:

Cool gig.

Sydnee:

This is, like, I can't... we, we talk about on this show all of the horrible things that humans have tried on each other in an attempt to make each other better, and then I... sometimes we don't stress enough, uh, the even worse things that people come up with to do to animals. How horrible is this?

Justin:

It's monstrous.

Sydnee:

So, don't, don't do this. That sounds terrible. Do you want ginger in your butt? You know what? If you do, that's okay, though. I'm not [laughing] saying you can't.

Justin:

Don't yuck their yums.

Sydnee:

I don't know. Maybe that's your thing.

Justin:

Is that, is that ginger?

Sydnee:

Uh, that... there's one other thing I wanna say about ginger 'cause I always say, "Is there a downside?" You know, if you're gonna pretend like this is a medicine, is there a downside? It can interact with some medications, so when I... you know, I think I, I read one thing that it can prevent blood clots. Well, I don't know that it prevents blood clots, but it can interact with some blood thinners, so don't... you know, if you're going to use ginger, especially medicinally, you're gonna take, like, supplements of ginger or massive doses of ginger, you should talk to your doctor if you're on medications 'cause it can interact with some medications, and it can cause heartburn. So, even though it can help with nausea, it could cause other GI problems.

Justin:

Shoo.

Sydnee:

So, um—

Justin:

Fire and ice.

Sydnee:

I don't know. I like ginger ale.

Justin:

In closing, Sydnee likes ginger ale.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

[laughs] Uh, that's gonna do it for us. Thank you so much for listening. Uh, big thank you to The Taxpayers for letting use their song, Medicines, as the intro and outro of our program. Uh, I wanna go encourage you... Oh, here's something fun. Uh, if you haven't checked out Still Buffering yet, that's the show that Sydnee does with her sisters Teylor and Rileigh, uh, I appeared on it this week. So if you wanna hear Sydnee and I talk about video games with Teylor and Rileigh, um, then you should listen to the newest episode of Still Buffering. It's a great show, and a lot of people really like it.

Sydnee:

Thank you, honey.

Justin:

And, uh, that's another Max Fun property. There's a lot of great shows there you can check out at maximumfun.org, um, but, uh, until, uh, the next time...

Sydnee:

And thank you to The Taxpayers.

Justin:

I did—I thanked them.

Sydnee:

You already did?

Justin:

Whoa. I don't know if ginger helps listening comprehension, but...

Sydnee:

I don't think you did.

Justin:

I fully did.

Sydnee:

All right.

Justin:

Play back the tape, Justin, future Justin. Play it back right here.

[zap] "Uh, big thank you to The Taxpayers." [zap]

Does that prove it?

Sydnee:

I don't know.

Justin:

Until next week, my name's Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

[theme music plays]

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