

Eating More Fermented or Cultured Foods

by Tina Johnson, AHNC (c)

Let's face it in the normal scheme of things we would never have to think twice about replenishing the bacteria that allow us to digest our food. But since we're living with antibiotic drugs, chlorinated water, antibacterial soaps and all these factors in our lives that destroy good bacteria as well as bad bacteria if we fail to replenish the good bacteria, we won't effectively get nutrients out of the food we're eating.

Our "convenient" foods today are processed leaving them without nutrient or enzymes also tend to upset the balance of bacteria needed to support overall intestinal health. What's more, many food products today are pasteurized or sterilized during the production process, and this destroys the helpful bacteria needed to promote intestinal health.

It's very recent that fermented or cultured foods have begun to disappear from our plate. Modern pickles and sauerkraut are made with vinegar instead of the traditional method of lacto-fermentation using salt. Bread and pasta are made with commercial yeast instead of being naturally leavened with wild yeast (sourdough). Wine, beer and cheeses are being pasteurized — killing off all the good bacteria. It's no wonder why we are so desperately in need to regain intestinal health and yet it can be supported naturally, by introducing fermented or cultured foods into our daily lifestyle.

What are Fermented or Cultured Foods?

Traditionally, fermented foods contain living micro-organisms that replenish the friendly bacteria in your digestive tract. Fermentation is a preservation technique to create lactic acid in sour foods such as sauerkraut, dry sausages, kimchi, yogurt and more.

Ancient Traditions

Did ancient traditions need to take prebiotics and probiotics as supplements? The answer is no. They were aware of the importance of eating daily fermented or cultured foods.

Every culture has a long tradition of fermented and raw foods, which are foods that provide for healthy intestinal flora and decrease the load on your pancreas and liver.

Did you know that traditional societies either soaked, sprouted, or fermented their grains prior to consuming them? While the reasons our ancestors practiced this level of grain preparation are debatable, we do know that sprouting, fermenting, and soaking grains can increase vitamin and mineral content availability by 300-500%.

History does tell us about the ways different cultures promoted their intestinal health before modern times. In the past, people used fermented foods like yogurt and sauerkraut -- as food preservatives and as support for intestinal and overall health. Humans all over the world have been fermenting food since ancient times. The earliest evidence of winemaking dates back to eight thousand years ago in the Caucasus area of Georgia. Seven-thousand-year-old jars which once contained wine were excavated in the Zagros Mountains in Iran. There is evidence that people were making fermenting beverages in Babylon around 5000 BC, ancient Egypt circa 3150 BC, pre-Hispanic Mexico circa 2000 BC, and Sudan

circa 1500 BC. There is also evidence of leavened bread in ancient Egypt dating back to 1500 BC and of milk fermentation in Babylon circa 3000 BC.

Fermented foods are part of nearly every traditional culture. As far back as Roman times, people ate sauerkraut because of its taste and benefits to overall health. In ancient Indian society, it became commonplace to enjoy a before-dinner yogurt drink called a lassi. Bulgarians are known both for their longevity and their high consumption of fermented milk and kefir. In Asian cultures, pickled fermentations of cabbage, turnips, eggplant, cucumbers, onions, squash and carrots still exist today. Ancient writings suggested that the Chinese recognized the unfitness of soybeans for human consumption in their natural form. Now 5000 years later, we are once again catching on to the anti-nutritive qualities of the soybean, and realizing that the only soybean worth eating is one that has been fermented.

In China and Japan, about an ounce of fermented soy food is eaten on a daily basis. When fermented soy foods are used in small amounts they help build the inner ecosystem, providing a wealth of friendly microflora to the intestinal tract that can help with digestion and assimilation of nutrients, and boost immunity. Dr. John Lee, author of several books on the health of women, recommended that women wishing to consume soy production eat only miso, tempeh, natto.

Fermented or Cultured Food Choices

Sauerkraut

KimChi

Pickles

Olives

Kombucha Tea

Rejuvelac – a drink made from sprouted grains

Kefir

Buttermilk

Sour Cream

Yogurt – stick to the Greek style

Sourdough Bread (leavened)

Miso – a fermented soybean paste

Natto

Tempeh – soybean alternative to animal protein

Where Do You Find Them?

Most of them are found at your local health food store or Asian stores and many of them can be purchased online. The Kombucha teas are gaining popularity and can be found in many grocery stores. Check the refrigerated sections.

It is important to note that traditionally fermented foods are not the equivalent of the same foods, commercially processed. The only way to insure you're consuming the real thing is to prepare your own fermented foods at home.

There are many advantages to going back to the traditional ways of our ancestors, and eating more fermented foods.

12 Reasons to Eat Fermented or Cultured Foods

1. **Improves digestion and absorption.** Fermenting our foods before we eat them is like partially digesting them before we consume them. Improve your digestion and it will improve absorption. According to Joanne Slavin, a professor in the Department of Food Science and Nutrition at the University of Minnesota, "...sometimes people who cannot tolerate milk can eat yogurt. That's because the lactose (which is usually the part people can't tolerate) in milk is broken down as the milk is fermented and turns into yogurt."
2. **Restores the proper balance of bacteria in the gut.** Do you suffer from lactose intolerance? Gluten intolerance? Constipation? Irritable bowel syndrome? Yeast infections? Allergies? Asthma? All of these conditions have been linked to a lack of good bacteria in the gut. Healthy bacterial cultures such as *Lactobacillus* are present in cultured vegetables. The more healthy microflora one has the more the body's receptors are blocked when exposed to dangerous bacteria and viruses.
3. **Raw, fermented foods are rich in enzymes.** According to the Food Renegade blog, "Your body needs enzymes to properly digest, absorb, and make full use of your food. As you age, your body's supply of enzymes decreases. This has caused many scientists to hypothesize that if you could guard against enzyme depletion, you could live a longer, healthier life."
4. **Fermented vegetables are high in antioxidants.**
5. **Excellent way to preserve food,** ensuring vitamin-rich food during winter months. Fermenting food helps to preserve it for longer periods of time. Milk will go bad in the fridge but kefir and yogurt last a lot longer. Sauerkraut, pickles and salsa will keep for months. And if you've got a huge batch of produce in your garden that you don't know how to use up — ferment it!
6. **Incorporates the tastes of "sour" in the five tastes of Traditional Chinese Medicine.** All five tastes must be eaten to ensure optimal health, they are: salty, sweet, sour, bitter and pungent. The sour taste corresponds to the wood element and benefits the liver and gall bladder.
7. **Creates new cultures in our intestinal eco-system,** which then create B vitamins such as folic acid, riboflavin, niacin, thiamin and biotin.
8. **Removes toxins from food:** all grains contain phytic acid which blocks absorption of zinc, calcium, iron and magnesium. Soaking and fermenting grains neutralizes the phytic acid.
9. **Anti-aging benefits**
10. **Strengthens the immune system**
11. **It's Affordable!** There's nothing fancy required for this hobby. And many of the foods required to make these recipes are very cheap. You can use inexpensive cabbage to make sauerkraut, or get yourself a kombucha scoby and with just pennies' worth of water, sugar and tea, you've got a health elixir.
12. **Fermenting food increases the flavor.** There's a reason humans enjoy drinking wine and eating stinky cheese. There's a reason we like sauerkraut on our pizza and salsa on our tortilla chips. It tastes good!

How to Incorporate More Fermented Foods Into Your Diet - DAILY

- Look for sourdough bread instead of bread made with commercial yeast or *make your own*.
- Drink fermented beverages. Kefir, kombucha tea and Rejuvelac are available at many health food stores. They're also very easy to make at home.
- Serve food with pickles, sauerkraut, salsa, ketchup, sour cream, kim chi, mayonnaise and other naturally fermented condiments. You can buy naturally fermented condiments at health food stores *or make your own*.
- Make miso dressing and soups. It's easy!
- Get creative and experiment! Try making kefir ice cream, sourdough crackers, fermented coconut milk, mead (honey wine), or even try making Mexican Pate.

How to Ferment Foods at Home

It's easy to get started with fermentation. You just need some starter cultures, some mason jars, and you're good to go. Some recipes can be made without starters like *Sauerkraut*.

Where to Find Fermented Food Starters

Check out: <http://www.culturesforhealth.com/splash.php> for sources of starter cultures like sourdough starter, kombucha scobies, kefir grains, and yogurt starters. A great source of fermented foods are there!

Sources:

"Getting Cultured with Fermented Foods" ([*Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune*](#)). Katz, Sandor Ellix. *Wild Fermentation*. Chelsea Green Publishing. 2003., *"Health Benefits of Raw & Fermented Foods"* ([*Food Renegade blog*](#)), Gates, Donna. *The Body Ecology Diet*. Body Ecology. 2002.