

How to Enjoy Fermented Foods Better

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Fermented foods promote optimal health thanks to their probiotics, which support digestion and immune function
- › The fermentation process creates unique flavor profiles through volatile and non-volatile compounds, which contribute to the distinctive taste and smell of fermented foods
- › The palatability of fermented foods like yogurt, kimchi, kombucha and sauerkraut can be enhanced by mixing them with complementary ingredients
- › Mass-produced fermented products often lack enough beneficial bacteria due to pasteurization, making homemade or raw, unpasteurized versions nutritionally superior for gut health
- › Gut health optimization involves more than consuming fermented foods. Strategies include taking probiotic supplements, increasing fiber intake, and reducing exposure to antibiotics and ultraprocessed foods

Fermented foods have been played a significant role in human history for thousands of years. They have provided sustenance and nutrition to a diverse range of cultures, such as German, Japanese, Korean, French and Russian.¹ While these traditional foods have their own unique flavors and undergo different fermentation process, one thing binds them together – they're also one of the healthiest foods humans can eat thanks to their probiotics.

Research² has shown that the probiotics in these foods play a role in diverse biological functions, such as promoting digestive health and immune function. However, some fermented foods are an acquired taste; not many people enjoy them, causing them to miss out on many health benefits.

Why Do Fermented Foods Taste That Way?

Fermentation is a chemical process wherein probiotics break down sugar into various substances such as alcohol, acid and gas. Probiotics initiate this process to survive, but this also results in byproducts such as carbon dioxide and lactic acid, which are important in increasing shelf life and flavor.³

Going deeper into the chemistry behind the flavor of fermented food, a study⁴ published in *Fermentation* noted that probiotics impart a complex, unique taste because of different components that result from the process:

"According to the research, the flavor substances in fermented food are mainly divided into two categories: volatile and non-volatile. Volatile flavor compounds are mainly alcohols, aldehydes, acids, ketones, lipids and hydrocarbon compounds, which are the main flavor sources of fermented food. The non-volatile flavor compounds determine the taste of food by amino acids and their derivatives, organic acids, fatty acids and other compounds."

Given that fermented foods impart a particular smell and taste, it's understandable why certain people don't like eating them. If this applies to you, I urge you to reconsider your stance, as fermented foods have crucial health benefits for your gut health. To help you make them more enjoyable, there are certain ways to boost their palatability.

How to Enhance the Flavor of Popular Fermented Foods

There are dozens of fermented foods available that will certainly grab your attention. If you don't enjoy their taste, the trick is to mix them with other ingredients to make a solid

flavor profile that's enjoyable. Take Sloth provides 20 different examples to get you started.⁵

Greek yogurt — A common fermented dairy product, it's best enjoyed with a bit of raw honey and some ripe fruit. It's also used as a base for smoothies. When looking for store-bought Greek yogurt, look for the "live and active cultures" label, and made with raw, grass fed milk. Later, I'll show you how to make your own yogurt.

Kefir — Another popular fermented dairy, try it plain to get the most probiotics. You can also add it to smoothies for a tart, creamy boost.

Sauerkraut — A traditional German food made by fermenting cabbages, sauerkraut works best on sandwiches or as a side dish.

Kimchi — Known for its spiciness, kimchi pairs well with other foods such as eggs and rice. If you're trying it for the first time, look for ones made with a milder flavor profile.

Miso — A paste made from fermented soybeans, it is commonly served as a soup, but can also be used as a marinade to add umami.

Tempeh — This fermented soybean product is known for its nutty flavor that pairs well with salads or sandwiches.

Kombucha — Believed to originate from China, kombucha is a drink made by fermenting tea. It's best enjoyed as a refreshing drink in between meals.

Pickles — The best pickles are ones that are cured with salt and water. Store them in the refrigerator to keep the probiotics alive.

Natto — Another Japanese fermented soybean dish, natto is known for its strong aroma and flavor. Beginners are advised to start small, as well as adding it to rice or soups.

Cottage cheese – Certain cottage cheeses sold contains probiotics. Look for ones with live cultures and mix them with fruit or vegetables. Make sure they're made from raw, grass fed milk.

Probiotic-rich cheeses – Traditionally aged cheeses such as gouda and mozzarella contain Lactobacillus bacteria. Again, make sure they're made from raw, grass fed milk.

Lassi – A traditional Indian yogurt drink that is blended with spices and some fruit. You can make your own lassi at home with a bit of raw honey for flavor and added health benefits.

Fermented beets – Beets are naturally high in sugar but fermenting them removes most of it while keeping the health benefits intact. That said, fermented beets are best enjoyed in salads or toast for a crunchy, tangy topping.

Buttermilk – A fermented dairy beverage made from leftover liquid after churning butter, buttermilk works best in smoothies and homemade dressings for added creaminess.

Apple cider vinegar – Raw, organic apple cider vinegar contains a cloudy portion called the "mother," which is the source of its probiotics. For more information on its health benefits, read my article "[Apple Cider Vinegar – An Ancient Remedy with Modern Benefits](#)."

Fermented garlic – Also called black garlic, research⁶ shows that it has higher amounts of vitamin C, protein and fiber compared to regular garlic.

Dark chocolate – Certain dark chocolate brands contain probiotics. When trying this snack, make sure the ingredients are sourced in a sustainable manner to protect your health.

Sourdough bread — A type of bread made with natural fermentation. Choose traditionally made, slow-fermented sourdough for the best intake of probiotics.

Kvass — A tangy beverage with Slavic origins, it is made from fermented rye bread. It's best served with meals.

Fermented carrots — Another vegetable that's commonly fermented, it's best paired with salads and sandwiches.

Make Fermented Vegetables at Home

Fermented foods are one of the most convenient ways to boost your health. If you haven't incorporated at least one into your daily diet, it's never too late to start. The great thing about them is that they're inexpensive and easy to make at home.

I'm a big believer in making fermented vegetables, since they're tasty and you can be sure of what they're made from. While fermented foods and beverages are available at supermarkets and health stores, many of them are not healthy.

The main issue with mass-produced fermented products is that they contain high levels of unnecessary ingredients, such as sugar, artificial sweeteners and other additives. What's worse is that these "probiotic foods" are relatively low in actual beneficial bacteria. The pasteurization process used in commercial products to extend their shelf life destroys the beneficial bacteria they're supposed to contain.

To maximize the benefits of fermented foods, purchase raw (unpasteurized) versions from a reputable food co-op or health store. Even better, make your own fermented foods at home. While this may seem complicated at first, it doesn't require a lot of time investment.

Start by getting canning jars and filtered water alongside organic vegetables you want to ferment. After packing them in the jars, the only step left is to wait for several days for

the veggies to ferment. To give you an idea where to begin, I encourage you to watch the step-by-step guide above.

How to Make Your Own Fermented Dairy

Aside from fermenting vegetables, I also recommend fermenting your own dairy. But make sure it is raw, sourced from grass fed cows. To confirm the authenticity of the milk, talk to the farmer raising the cows, and ask to visit the place yourself. Once it has been verified, follow this recipe from Blue Water Sailing:⁷

Directions

1. Place the desired amount of milk in a pot.
2. Heat the milk gently to about 109 degrees Fahrenheit, or 43 degrees Celsius (this temperature ensures you retain the milk's natural beneficial bacteria).
3. Measure out and add a high-quality starter culture when the milk reaches the correct temperature.
4. Mix thoroughly.
5. Preheat a large, heat-resistant glass jar by pouring boiling water into it.
6. Pour out the boiling water.
7. Add the milk mixture to the jar.
8. Secure a lid on the jar to prevent heat loss.
9. Keep the jar warm for at least six to eight hours, or longer, to activate the cultures.
10. Place your finished yogurt in the refrigerator for five to six hours or until it becomes firm.

Take care when heating the milk – overheating it kills the live cultures already present in the milk, hampering fermentation. Additionally, wrap a couple of thick towels around the jar and place it in an insulated cooler to keep the mixture warm and help activate the cultures.

Once the milk ferments to your desired consistency, store it in the refrigerator, where it will stay fresh for five to seven days. Once you decide to make a new batch, simply add a few tablespoons of the yogurt you already made to the new milk.^{8,9}

Additional Strategies to Boost Your Gut Health

Gut health is more than just eating fermented foods – that's just the tip of the iceberg. There are other ways to optimize your gut. Here are some of my top recommendations:

Do

Do your due diligence when buying fermented foods – Make sure that all ingredients come from trusted organic sources.

Take a probiotic supplement – If you don't eat fermented foods on a regular basis, a probiotic supplement can be useful.

Boost your soluble and insoluble fiber intake, focusing on well-cooked vegetables and ripe fruits.

Get your hands dirty in the garden – Exposure to bacteria and viruses in soil can help strengthen your immune system

Avoid

Antibiotics, unless absolutely necessary. If you do take them, make sure to reseed your gut with fermented foods and/or a high-quality probiotic supplement.

Conventionally raised meats and other animal products, as CAFO animals are routinely fed low-dose antibiotics.

Chlorinated and/or fluoridated water – This includes during bathing or showering.

Processed foods – Excessive refined sugars, along with otherwise "dead" nutrients, feed pathogenic bacteria.

Do

and provide long-lasting immunity against disease.¹⁰

Avoid

They're also loaded with **linoleic acid (LA)**, which is the most damaging ingredient in your diet.

Food emulsifiers such as polysorbate 80, lecithin, carrageenan, polyglycerols and xanthan gum may also have an adverse effect on your gut flora.

Open your windows – Research shows opening a window and increasing natural airflow can improve the diversity and health of the microbes in your home, which in turn benefit you.

Agricultural chemicals – Glyphosate (Roundup) is a known antibiotic and could kill many of your beneficial gut microbes if you eat foods contaminated with it.

Wash your dishes by hand instead of using the dishwasher – Washing your dishes by hand leaves more bacteria on the dishes than dishwashers do.

Antibacterial soap, as it kills off both good and bad bacteria and contributes to the development of antibiotic resistance.

Eating off these less-than-sterile dishes may decrease your risk of allergies by stimulating your immune system.¹¹

Sources and References

- ¹ [How to Cook Recipes, “36 Fermented Foods from Around the World”](#)
- ² [Cureus. 2022 Nov 9;14\(11\):e31313, Figure 1](#)
- ³ [IFT, August 1, 2021](#)
- ⁴ [Fermentation, “Flavor and Aroma in the Fermented Food”](#)
- ⁵ [Take Sloth, November 3, 2024](#)
- ⁶ [Foods. 2024 May 26;13\(11\):1665, Conclusions](#)

- ^{7, 9} Blue Water Sailing July 18, 2016
- ⁸ The Nourished Life 2017
- ¹⁰ ISME Journal 2012 Aug;6(8):1469-79, Abstract
- ¹¹ Pediatrics (2015) 135 (3): e590–e597, Abstract