

Mummy I don't like sauerkraut....but it's very good for you

Why is it that our diets don't feature the variety of fermented foods that were so popular for past generations? Rarely was a meal eaten without at least one fermented food or drink and in some cultures this persists but increasingly it is not. One reason is our preference for sweetness, which manufacturers consistently exploit, another is industrialization and manufacturing, which is about speed, uniformity and economy, rarely nutrition and a third reason is refrigeration, the need for preserving is less. This is unfortunate as fermented foods confer great health benefits.

Many foods we eat today were once done through a process of fermentation which takes time. Today many are manufactured in bulk; supermarket breads instead of sourdough breads, plastic cheese rather than aged cheeses, ham and bacon instead of taking months now produced more quickly by soaking in a chemical brine, pickles, relishes and chutneys formerly fermented are now done for speed, economy and uniformity.

On every continent man fermented grains, milk, vegetables, meat, and fish. Fermented foods were prepared by each family, in France, bread, cheese, and sausage, in colder climes, sauerkraut, beets and cucumbers, olives in the mediterranean, in Poland sour soups and pickled herrings, in Japan miso, in Indonesia tempeh, in Korea kimchi, in Equador fermented rice, in west Africa soumbala and so on.

Almost everywhere in the world peoples ate fermented foods on a daily basis, even for breakfast, no doubt because after a night of sleep the body needs something that is easily and quickly digested. The closest many people come today is yogurt, but unfortunately for many it is not the soured product of milk fermentation but the sugary concoction of industry.

Lacto-fermentation is the process of fermentation that uses lactic-acid-producing bacteria called lactobacilli and just as certain yeasts convert the sugars in grapes, hops and barley to alcohol so lactobacilli convert the starches and sugars in vegetables, fruits and dairy into lactic acid.

Lactic acid was and still is an effective way of preserving many foods. It is a natural preservative that inhibits putrefying bacteria, but the benefits of lacto-fermentation go way beyond preservation. The proliferation of lactobacilli in fermented vegetables and dairy contributes to their digestibility and increases their vitamin content. There is considerably more vitamin C in sauerkraut than there is in the humble cabbage.

Lacto-fermented foods normalize the acidity of the stomach. If it is insufficient (increasingly as we get older) it stimulates the acid producing glands, and if it is too acid then it corrects it. Lactic acid helps breakdown proteins and fats, it aids the assimilation of iron, the breakdown of which depends on the quantity of hydrochloric acid and the amount of vitamin C, which is why sauerkraut and other lacto-fermented vegetables high in this vitamin are so good for you. Lactic acid stimulates the pancreas, important for diabetics....sauerkraut contains large quantities of choline which lowers blood pressure, slows the heart rate, and promotes calmness and sleep.

Even in ancient times different types of fermented juices were used as remedies against typhus and other similar illnesses. Today research confirms the beneficial action of these lactic-acid-producing bacteria in preventing the growth of pathogenic bacteria, even carcinogenic substances are inhibited. Thus the state of our intestinal flora contributes not only to the functioning of our intestine and the absorption of nutrients but also our ability to resist infection.

Among all the vegetables that man can preserve through lacto-fermentation, cabbage has been the most popular. Sauerkraut has a long history – in China they fermented cabbage 6000 yrs ago; in ancient Rome, Tiberius carried a barrel of sauerkraut with him during his long voyages to the Middle East because the Romans knew that it protected them from intestinal parasites, Captain Cook carried 60 barrels on his second voyage and lost not one sailor to scurvy! A 1999 study published in the *Lancet* found that consumption of lacto-fermented vegetables was positively associated with low rates of asthma, skin problems and auto-immune diseases in Swedish children.

So please introduce your children to sauerkraut, (and other lacto-fermented foods) you don't need much just a small serving accompanying each meal. Bangers (organic of course) and mash and a little sauerkraut, to aid digestion – they may even like it. For further information and how to make lacto-fermented foods please go to www.westonaprice.org