

## FEELING THE FERVOR FOR FERMENTING

The ancient method of preserving food is catching on with health-conscious chefs and consumers

Food enthusiasts and cutting-edge chefs are fermenting, and savvy supermarkets are jumping on the bandwagon. They stock kimchi and sauerkraut next to kefir and Icelandic skyr in the dairy case. Kombucha, along with other probiotic drinks, stands with sodas in the beverage cooler.

Everything old is new again. For many of our grandparents, fermenting was a way of life, particularly in Asia. It's an ancient method of food preservation that extends seasonal eating to year-round. What to do with a bumper crop of cabbage? Make kimchi or sauerkraut.

I recently got fermenting fever at Forage restaurant in Vancouver, where chef Chris Whittaker and "fermenteur" Todd Graham extended fermentation's range at a five-course dinner called Forage Ferments. It began with "miso three ways," rich and deeply flavourful pastes totally unlike the store-bought kind, followed by miso-basted duck breast. For dessert, there was an amazing chickpea miso hazelnut ice cream.

Whittaker used organic chickpeas rather than soy to make miso. He says soy is harder to digest for some people. It certainly tasted better than the salty store-bought variety.

Basically, fermenting "cooks" food by creating conditions that allow good bacteria to kill harmful bacteria. It's also a great way to preserve the nutritional benefits of a harvest at its prime. It is uber-healthy, particularly for the gut. "The health aspect of fermenting is more important to me now that I'm almost 40," says Whittaker.

Graham, age 40, first became obsessed with fermenting on a trip to Japan.



ABOVE, homemade pork and squash tacos with sauerkraut from Forage restaurant; top right, "miso three ways" from Forage.

"You make this incredible product and ask yourself, 'how did I do that?' It's like magic," Graham says. "And it's alive." By that, he means fermented foods contain live bacterial cultures. Think sourdough bread, yogurt and cheese, beer and wine.

"Most Japanese households used to chuck vegetables into a crock pot daily," says Graham as he buries broccoli stems in a ceramic pot full of *nukadoko*, a fermented rice bran "bed" where vegetables will be tucked in for the night. He is making *nukazuke*, Japanese pickles. Like sourdough starter, *nukadoko* needs feeding daily.

Whittaker mixes rice bran with dried local bull kelp, sea salt and beer to create the bed. "We add vegetables in the morning and they are ready to eat that night," he explains. I bit into a broccoli stem from the day before; it tasted more like malt than salt.

Next up, Graham adds salt and sugar to a bowl of red peppers and writes the amounts in a notebook. He learned from trial and error to take detailed notes during the fermenting process. The peppers won't have a long ferment, unlike miso, which takes anywhere from three months to a year. "If my miso turns out wicked in 2016 and I didn't know how I did it, that sucks," he says, laughing.



Why peppers? Good chefs watch their food costs and waste nothing. The peppers would have gone in the compost heap if he didn't ferment them. So there's another plus for fermenting — it's economical.

Like foraging, fermenting embraces the do-it-yourself spirit. Whittaker suggests that novices start with sauerkraut. It's almost impossible to screw up and you don't need any special equipment. You do need to invest some time, but not as much as for miso. About two or three weeks is needed for lactobacillus to turn a pot of salty cabbage into delicious sauerkraut.

Whittaker peeks into a Bradley smoker at six albacore tuna loins. It's his take on *katsubuchi* (a dried fermented fish) that will be shaved on some dishes and used as the base for *dashi* (Japanese broth).

These days, I substitute sauerkraut for coleslaw for and miso paste for mayo in fish tacos and sandwiches — the possibilities are endless.

To help you get started, fermenting workshops are popping up in communities across B.C. (Vancouver, Victoria and Duncan, to name a few).

In Vancouver, Todd Graham conducts small workshops and hosts meals focused on fermentation on a monthly basis. Coming up is a chickpea miso and tempeh workshop. Check out HandTasteFerments on Facebook or email [handtasteferments@gmail.com](mailto:handtasteferments@gmail.com) for more information.

As well, fermenting guru Sandor Katz gives workshops worldwide. Check them out at [wildfermentation.com](http://wildfermentation.com).