

Sauerkraut

There are two essentials for making great sauerkraut. The first is **submersion**, or creating anaerobic (airless) conditions. The lactic-acid bacteria responsible for creating that fantastic flavor, and preserving your cabbage, are happiest in airless conditions. Keeping your veggies away from air also prevents mold. The second essential is **temperature**. Too cool and fermentation won't start or will stall. Too hot, and fermentation will happen too quickly, raising the risk of mold, off flavors and mushy vegetables.

Equipment

Widemouthed pint jar
Jar small enough to fit inside your wide-mouth jar
Clean kitchen cloth, paper towel or coffee filter
Rubberband
Water filter

Ingredients

(~1/2 head) (1 pounds/450 g) cabbage
2 teaspoons (11 g) or (2.5% by weight) kosher salt
Assorted seasonings (ginger, garlic, hot peppers, spices)

Process

1. Remove any unattractive or wilted outer leaves from the cabbage. Reserve one, compost the rest. Cut out the core and then give the cabbage a rinse under room temperature water.
2. Shred cabbage into 1/4 inch strips using a sharp chef's knife, the slicer blade of your food processor, a mandolin or a kraut shredder.
3. Place shredded cabbage into a large bowl, add salt and toss thoroughly for about 30 seconds or until the cabbage has a sheen of liquid on it. The salt draws the liquid out of the cabbage.
4. You now have the option of continuing to gently massage and squeeze the cabbage or letting the salt and cabbage continue osmosis while you go do something else for 20 minutes. If you let them sit a bit, the work of kneading the cabbage to release as much water as possible will be easier when you return.
5. Work it for another few minutes. When there is a visible puddle of water in the bottom of the bowl and the cabbage pieces stay in a clump when squeezed, you are read to start packing your jar. Add spices into the mix and toss cabbage to evenly distribute them.
6. Take a handful of cabbage in your dominant hand and a clean, quart-size jar in the other. Press the cabbage into the bottom of the jar, and pack it along the bottom, with the top of your fist or your fingers. Continue packing in this fashion, pressing along the sides and bottom, until the jar is full to about 1 inch below the rim.
7. If there's still cabbage that hasn't been packed in to the jar yet, press down on the top of the cabbage in the jar and tilt it to pour cabbage liquid back into the bowl. This will give you more space in which to pack the remaining cabbage.
8. Use the cabbage leaf you reserved to create a "cabbage shelf" (See "How to Make a Cabbage Shelf" below). Use your preferred method to weigh the cabbage down and cover.
9. Allow to ferment at room temperature for 2-6 weeks, checking at least once a week to make sure that the brine level is still above the top of the cabbage. If it isn't, press down on your weight to get the brine to rise back above. If it is severely depleted, you may want to add more brine, at a concentration of about 5%, but do this only in case of absolute necessity.
10. Once the taste is sour enough for your preference, remove the weight, put the lid on the jar and place in the fridge.

Tips and Troubleshooting

It stopped bubbling - That's normal. The bacteria that are active in the later stages of fermentation produce much less CO₂ than the bacteria that are active early on.

Occasionally when vegetables are imported from certain countries, they're irradiated. Irradiated vegetables have lost their microbial friends and will not ferment. Labels must state the vegetables are

irradiated, but you may need to read very carefully. If your kraut never bubbled, this could have been the issue. It's pretty unlikely to happen with cabbage, though.

Kraut is soft - It's still edible, but only if you like how it tastes. Here are potential reasons why:

Did you use a starter such as whey? Don't do that.

Is your home super hot? High temps cause, fermentation to move too quickly, causing mushy ferments.

Piece size too small for fermentation time - Smaller pieces (like shredded or grated cabbage) will ferment more quickly than strips. You may want to cut fermentation time by as much as a week if using smaller bits.

There's something weird on the top of my fermenting liquid -

Does it look like fuzzy mold? It is fuzzy mold. Next time, submerge your veggies under the brine completely and this will not be an issue. You can skim the mold and eat what's beneath on a packed ferment like sauerkraut. White, fuzzy vegetable molds are not harmful, but they can impart an unpleasant flavor, so the choice to use the vegetables beneath them or toss/compost them is yours.

Does it look like something white or whitish that isn't mold? It's likely Kahm yeast, which is harmless yeast or yeasts that sometimes occurs during the fermentation process. Skim it off the top and enjoy! Same thing goes for unpleasant flavors. Let your nose and taste buds be your guide.

How long is it good?

They're good as long as you enjoy eating them. Once they've turned to mush (many months or even a year or more in the fridge) it's probably time to say goodbye. Even then, though, if the flavor is still good, they make for great soups, stews, dips, etc.

RECAP

What you need

Salt, Cabbage, Container

What you need to do to them

Shred cabbage, mix with salt, pack tightly into your container, weigh down, leave them be

What's going on in there?

Naturally present bacteria are eating the naturally present sugars and turning them into other stuff including acid (yay for safety and taste complexity) and CO2 (yay for bubbles), all while adding probiotics and vitamins and making minerals more digestible!

Why is this so easy?

No human beings were involved in the process design: this is all Mother Nature. Animals ferment, and there's plenty of evidence that humans fermented before writing was even dreamed of. It happens on its own in nature. It's meant to happen. We evolved with fermented foods.

Resources

www.wildfermentation.com

Wild Fermentation by Sandor Katz

The Art of Fermentation by Sandor Katz

Real Food Fermentation by Alex Lewin

Me! Ask me questions in the comment of my site or on social media. You can also email me but I suck at responding.

*Amanda Feifer is the fermentation educator behind the blog Pickle.com. She teaches classes on topics ranging from hot sauce and miso to sauerkraut and kombucha. Her fermentation writing has been featured on The Huffington Post and Food Riot. Keep your eyes peeled (and your vegetables unpeeled) for her upcoming book *Ferment Your Vegetables* (Fair Winds Press, October 2015).*