



LIFESTYLE

Sauerkraut Is Getting the Love We Always Knew It Deserved

At a time when chefs are fermenting everything from peanuts to peaches, the O.G. crock-product is having a comeback.

BY CARLY FISHER
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Photo By Alex Lau

For Chef **Jeffrey Stoneberger** of pop-up restaurant **2Nixons** in Charleston, S.C., sauerkraut was a literal life saver. While working at Saison in San Francisco, Stoneberger was diagnosed with Crohn's disease and inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), both severe autoimmune gastrointestinal conditions. "Food would just ferment in my stomach and that was causing all this pain," he says. "I tried everything from steroids to Prednisone. Then I thought, why if I tried the natural way of doing things?"

Tipped off by industry friends working in research and development roles like **Kyle Connaughton** of **SingleThread Farms**, Stoneberger started looking into lacto-fermented foods. "All roads lead to **Cultured Pickle**," he says, referring to the heralded small-batch pickling shop in Berkeley, California, whom he credits as the catalyst for changing his entire diet. "When I ate fermented foods—especially sauerkraut and kimchi—the burn went away. Nothing made me feel as good as eating this way."

Long relegated to baseball stadium hot dogs and deli fridges, sauerkraut is getting its due thanks to small-batch artisans and chefs who are stoking American appetites for fermented food of all kinds.

"Food preservation is one of the most ancient and beautiful forms of scientific alchemy, where something is becoming even more nutritious and alive than it was before," says **David Klingenberg**, owner and self-appointed "Chief Fermenting Officer" of **The Brinery**, a small-batch fermentation producer in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

A farmer by trade, Klingenberg started The Brinery in 2013 as a bootstrap operation at local farmers markets. Now he distributes his kraut to 500 stores and restaurants throughout the Midwest. He's one of a number of small-batch producers reviving the art of sauerkraut.

Unlike the stuff you find in plastic bags near the cold cuts, which has been pasteurized to kill bacteria, small-batch sauerkraut is lacto-fermented, a fancy term for soaking uncooked cabbage in brine (salt and water), then letting nature take the wheel to ferment in the vegetable's own beneficial bacteria.



Smoked sablefish with sauerkraut granité, sourdough cracker, and frozen crème fraîche at Hugo's in Portland, Maine. Photo By Zack Bowen

Not only is this method one of the oldest methods of preservation, it's incredibly shelf stable. Small-batch producers will let the cabbage sit in barrels for upwards of a year to let the product slowly ferment before it even needs to be bottled, and as long as it's refrigerated and sitting in brine, the kraut can last indefinitely.

Lacto-fermented kraut is touted for its health benefits like vitamins C and K, and probiotics helpful for restoring microflora, the microorganisms that exist in our digestive tracts and regulate intestinal functions.

Inspired by his own health transformation, Stoneberger made raw fermentation the backbone of 2Nixons' concept. Though Stoneberger does a lot of his own fermentation in-house, he continues to source Cultured Pickle's sauerkraut now that he's in Charleston, using their briny, dulce-spiked sauerkraut in Japanese-inspired dishes like sauerkraut okonomiyaki and sour Shio ramen.

Other producers are also experimenting with flavors. The Brinery's Storm Cloud Zapper includes beets, fresh ginger root, and sea salt. Husband-and-wife team **Jane and Simon Frost** at **Thirty Acre Farm** in Maine infuse one of their krauts with Maine-harvested seaweed and farm-grown horseradish. Spices like curry, turmeric, and jalapeño kick up the krauts at New York's **Hawthorne Valley Farm**. At **Hugo's** in Portland, Maine, Chef-owner **Mike Wiley** turns sauerkraut into a savory granita for a cured and smoked fish dish with frozen crème fraîche and seeded crackers, made in-house from a sourdough mother. And Executive Chef **Adam Schop** uses sorrel, ginger, and pimento to heighten the dark purple "sorrel-kraut" at long-time Caribbean favorite **Miss Lily's** in NYC.

The recent fermentation craze could be called a trend, but sauerkraut producers aren't thinking of it that way.

"There's been a general uptick over the past decade of hipster food culture gravitating towards authentic, real foods as a health trend," Klingenberg of The Brinery says. "But it's not a mistake that we evolved on this planet eating these foods. They're nourishing and long-lasting. Fermented foods will never go out of style."

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