At our January 2016 meeting, guest speaker **Margaret Vant Erve** spoke to us about fermented foods. Below are the recipes for yogurt and sauerkraut that Margaret shared with us.

Balkan Style Yogurt

Ingredients

1 bag of homogenized milk

1 package of yogourmet yogurt starter (available at most health food stores)

1/3 cup skim milk powder

Sweetener if desired (ex. honey, maple syrup, sugar)

Method

Pour milk into a stainless steel pot and put on medium heat. You can start on high for the first 3 minutes to speed the process but then turn it to medium to avoid scorching the milk. Stir periodically and bring milk to an almost boil. Use an instant read thermometer. Your milk should reach 180 to 185°F. Do not boil the milk or it may affect the texture of the yogurt. If you want sweetened yogurt, add your sweetener now so it completely dissolves in the yogurt. It doesn't take much. Start with 2 tablespoons and if that isn't sweet enough, add more next time. You can also add vanilla or other flavourings (note that the texture of the yogurt will alter slightly with a sweetener added).

Remove from the stove and cool to 110°F. To speed this process, I pour the milk into the container it will ferment in and then set this container into a pot of cold water. The milk will cool in 25 to 30 minutes.

Put the starter (which should always be stored in your refrigerator) and the skim milk powder in a small bowl. Add about ½ cup of the cooled milk to the powders and whisk to combine. Add this to the warm milk and stir well. Do not froth the milk though. (The powdered milk will help to make the yogurt thicker and adds more protein)

Place the lid on the container and then incubate the yogurt in either a yogurt maker or wrap the container with many warm blankets and set in a warm place such as near a register. Leave for at least 6 to 8 hours and up to 12 hours. The longer you leave it, the tangier the yogurt and the less lactose for those with lactose problems. Some people leave their yogurt for 24 hours but I find it is too tart then and gets curdled. If you make it prior to going to bed, then an overnight incubation is just right. Your yogurt should be quite thick. Once the incubation is done, place container in the fridge to cool.

Homemade Sauerkraut in a Mason Jar

Makes 1 to 1 1/2 quarts

Ingredients

1 medium head green cabbage (about 3 pounds)

1 1/2 tablespoons kosher salt (2% salt to vegetable by weight)

1 tablespoons caraway seeds (optional, for flavor)

Equipment

Cutting board

Chef's knife

Large Mixing bowl

2 quart wide mouth canning jar with clamp lids (or two quart mason jars)

Canning funnel (optional)

Clean plastic food storage bag

Clean stones, marbles, or other weights for weighing the jelly jar

Method

Clean everything: When fermenting anything, it's best to give the good, beneficial bacteria every chance of succeeding by starting off with as clean an environment as possible. Make sure your canning jars are washed and rinsed of all soap residue. You'll be using your hands to massage the salt into the cabbage, so give those a good wash, too.

Slice the cabbage: Discard the wilted, limp outer leaves of the cabbage. Cut the cabbage into quarters and trim out the core. Slice each quarter down its length, making 8 wedges. Slice each wedge crosswise into very thin ribbons. Alternatively you can use a mandolin to shred the cabbage (I do not use a food processor as I find it shreds the cabbage too fine).

Combine the cabbage and salt: Transfer the cabbage to a big mixing bowl and sprinkle the salt over top. Begin working the salt into the cabbage by massaging and squeezing the cabbage with your hands. At first it might not seem like enough salt, but gradually the cabbage will become watery and limp — more like coleslaw than raw cabbage. This will take 5 to 10 minutes. If you would like to flavor your sauerkraut with caraway seeds, mix them in now. If there is insufficient brine, allow the cabbage to sit for 30 to 60 minutes to allow the salt to bring out the brine, then go back and massage again. The fresher your cabbage is, the more brine that will be produced. If you find you are not getting enough brine, then consider adding a veggie that gives off a lot of liquid such as turnip, carrots or beets. Or you could add a few tablespoons of citrus juice.

Pack the cabbage into the jar: Grab handfuls of the cabbage and pack them into the canning jar. If you have a canning funnel, this will make the job easier. Every so often, tamp down the cabbage in the jar with your fist or a tamper. Make sure the cabbage is firmly packed down. Pour any liquid released by the cabbage while you were massaging it into the jar. Do not fill past the shoulder of the jar to allow for the weights, brine and expansion as it ferments. It is essential that the cabbage be covered with the brine.

Follow this with a primary follower: Place a portion of one of the unblemished larger outer leaves of the cabbage over the surface of the sliced cabbage. This will help keep the cabbage submerged in its liquid. If you did not keep a cabbage leaf, you can use a piece of parchment paper cut to size or a piece of plastic wrap. This will keep any of the cabbage shreds from floating above the brine.

Weigh the cabbage down: Fill your clean food storage bag with some clean marbles or stones, adding just enough weight to keep the cabbage leaf down on top of the cabbage. Tie a snug knot to keep the marbles secured in a tight bundle and then snip the excess plastic with scissors. Place this on top of the cabbage leaf. This will help keep the chopped cabbage weighed down, and submerged beneath its liquid, thus preventing any mold from forming. Make sure there is at least 1 inch of head room remaining to allow for the gas development. You don't want to lose a lot of your precious brine.

Cover the jar: Clamp down the lid. If you are using mason jars, then screw on loosely. A lot of gas will develop in the first few days and this needs to be allowed to release, yet without allowing excess oxygen in. Lactobacillus plantarum, the primary bacteria responsible for Stage Two, works best without oxygen. Anaerobically (without oxygen), Lactobacillus plantarum does their job the way we want them to – they cause fermentation of cabbage via lactic acid. Aerobically (with oxygen), it will produce acetic acid (vinegar). Since we're making sauerkraut, oxygen must be avoided.

Sauerkraut that is allowed oxygen will not contain any vitamin C in the final product after just six days. It will also increase chances of mold forming. If you are regularly getting mold on the top of your cabbage, this is a visible sign you are allowing too much oxygen in. Oxygen also allows pink yeasts to grow and could result in soft 'kraut.

Finally, don't mess with your brine. When brine is stirred, you introduce air which makes conditions more favorable for growth of spoilage bacteria.

Ferment the cabbage: Place your jars on a cookie sheet (to collect any brine that seeps out) and put in a cupboard or at least away from direct sunlight. As it's fermenting, keep the kraut at room temperature — 65°F to 75°F. Check your sauerkraut every day during the first week. It will release a lot of gas in the first few days. Simply open the canning jar to allow the gas to release and then close it again.

Because this is a small batch of sauerkraut, it will ferment more quickly than larger batches. There's no hard and fast rule for when the sauerkraut is "done" — go by how it tastes but understand that the longer you allow the cabbage to ferment, the more healthy bacteria it will develop. Taste your cabbage after 2 weeks, then again at 3 weeks. 3 to 4 weeks is ideal for sauerkraut that has all the healthy bacteria you need.

While it's fermenting, you may see bubbles coming through the cabbage, foam on the top, or white scum. These are all signs of a healthy, happy fermentation process. The scum can be skimmed off the top either during fermentation or before refrigerating. If you see any mold, I personally would not keep it, though this method of keeping it anaerobic should not produce any mold.

Store sauerkraut for several months: This sauerkraut is a fermented product so it will keep for at least 6 months.

Recipe Notes

- Sauerkraut with other cabbages: Red cabbage, Napa cabbage, and other cabbages all make great sauerkraut. Make individual batches or mix them up for multi-coloured sauerkraut!
- Larger or smaller batches: To make larger or smaller batches of sauerkraut, keep same ratio of cabbage to salt and adjust the size of the container. Smaller batches will ferment more quickly and larger batches will take longer.
- Hot and cold temperatures: Do everything you can to store sauerkraut at a cool room temperature. At high temperatures, the sauerkraut can sometimes become unappetizingly mushy or go bad. Low temperatures (above freezing) are fine, but fermentation will proceed more slowly.