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Pickling (and Kraut!)

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NC State University Libraries

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Editors note: *This publication contains the video of the talk from the Fermentology webinar series, as well as a lightly edited transcript of the lecture.*

Abstract

[Vivian Howard](#) will tell the story of her wild ride from a small North Carolina city (Kinston) to New York and back, a story that is far from over and features a wildly successful television show, a growing number of restaurants and a starring role in the transformation of Kinston. Howard will discuss pickles, kraut and their role in food storage in the southeastern United States. She'll then share a recipe featuring both old and new end of season vegetables.

Watch the talk

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

Pickling with Vivian Howard | Fermentology mini-seminars

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Introduction

Here we're going to explore kraut. And what's really interesting is that I grew up in Eastern North Carolina. I moved away. I came back. I opened a restaurant in this small town here called Kinston. And I was maybe 28 years old, and I had dreams of being a respected, cutting-edge chef.

At that time, when we moved back to Eastern North Carolina, we had been here about a year, all the chefs I respected were talking about this book by Sandor Katz, *The Art of Fermentation*. And so, obviously, I got the book. I was reading it.

One morning, I woke up. I went to my front doorstep in Jones County, and I opened the door — and there was this bag of, like, dark green leaves floating in a milky liquid. And I'm like: *what is this?* My dog wouldn't even get near it.

So I called my dad — he's the person I call whenever Eastern North Carolina asks me a question I can't answer. And I'm thinking someone is playing a prank on us. They have put something entirely disgusting on my doorstep. I describe it to him. He's like: *Vivian, that's not a prank. That's a gift. It's collard kraut.*

My little arrogant chef brain thought only good things happened in New York City and nothing smart happened here — that's what I thought at the time. That brain was blown to think that I was going to bed reading Sandor

Katz's *The Art of Fermentation* book to learn this cutting-edge technique — and these old folks, down the road from me, we're making kraut with collards.

That was kind of my first introduction into the fermentation world of Eastern North Carolina. Since then, I have come to love kraut of all kinds as essentially an ingredient in my cooking. And my new book, *This Will Make It Taste Good*, is a book about 10 chapters of quintessential flavor heroes, ingredients that I call on in my cooking — and one of those is kraut.

You Can Do Kraut

In my book, the chapter that focuses on kraut is actually “Can Do Kraut,” and I'm posing like Rosie the Riveter at the opening of this chapter — because this is a really fun book, but also because I want to encourage the average home cook to make kraut at home.

This is because I think that fermenting something is a process that you can follow. It is something that you can share with your family. And it's something that you can dictate the taste you want from it. It keeps forever. It's so incredibly healthy. The reasons and the list to make kraut are endless.

Making Kraut

Cabbage

The way that we're going to go about this today is I generally start any kraut that I make with cabbage — green cabbage. Cabbage is, I think, one of the most unsung heroes of the kitchen. It has a very long shelf life. It has a lot of fiber and nutrients. It's filling. You can eat it raw. You can eat it fermented. You can eat it cooked. It's so incredibly versatile. And it's crunchy, which is one of the reasons I like it for kraut.

You can make kraut, which is essentially a fermented pickle, with really any crunchy vegetable, but I think that cabbage has a nice baseline flavor that carries the flavors of other ingredients. So I always start my kraut with cabbage.

I use a food processor that has that shredder blade. Back in the day, when I was reading Sandor Katz's book and dreaming about being a renowned chef, I would have used my knife and probably made a million different little knife cuts to have fancy kraut. But today I use my food processor.

With my kraut, what I aim to do is about 2 pounds of vegetables — and you'll want to ensure that those vegetables are shredded.

And whenever you're making kraut, I think it's really important, if you can and if the leaves are of quality, to use the outside leaves, as well. These are the leaves that you might not use if you were making your slaw or sautéing cabbage. Because those outer leaves have a dark green color, they make your kraut prettier.

Tatsoi

With my kraut I add tatsoi, which is in the cabbage family. But my farmer friend, Warren, grows this tatsoi — and it's sort of juicy and kind of spinachy, with a little bit of an edge. It's got a nice, crunchy stalk. And it adds some dimension and also some nice color to my kraut. I also put this through the food processor.

Variances with Kraut

When I went and made collard kraut with my neighbors who gave me that gift — they didn't chop their collards at all. They had whole leaves in a big barrel and layered the leaves. Over every layer, they put a smattering of salt, and then they pounded the layers with a big mallet thing.

So I tell you that to tell you that there's more than one way to skin a cat. There's more than one way to ferment vegetables, and this is just one way. It's the way that I find to be really simple at home.

Somewhere South

I was part of this show on PBS this spring, which I'm really proud of. It's called *Somewhere South*. We had a pickle episode where we explored different pickling methods all around the South. We went to Eastern Kentucky and made chow-chow. And I cooked with some of my Southeast Asian friends and we made all sorts of achar and pickles.

Kraut + Kids

When the episode aired, which happened to be during COVID, I decided that I was going to make kraut, with my children, on social media. And I thought it would be great, because kraut and these steps are things that kids enjoy. And this particular Instagram story went incredibly well — and I was like: *I'm going to have my kids doing this more.*

Well, time went by, and we did not do that. But then a couple of weeks ago, I did a virtual book event with my kids and we made kraut again. And all hell broke loose — and I think it's because they knew what they were doing when it came to the kraut part of things. And so they decided that they were going to show off. So that's why they're not part of this — I think the third time they would probably just tear this whole place down.

Mixing + Making Kraut

With the ground tatsoi, you'll fold that into the cabbage. Here you can use your knife. You can even do this with whole leaves. The bigger the particle size, it'll take longer to ferment, but that's OK.

My ratios for making kraut is about 2 pounds of vegetables to 2 teaspoons of sea salt, pickling salt, or kosher salt. Do not use iodized salt (which y'all probably already all know that, because you've been fermenting). So 2 teaspoons to my 2 pounds of vegetables.

This is a very basic flavor profile. I'm just simply fermenting cabbage and tatsoi. You can certainly add any number of vegetables you want. You could do beets, kohlrabi, turnips, rutabaga, onion. You could add spices, if you'd like.

I don't do any of that because I really like to use my finished kraut in a lot of different dishes. I find that when you add really distinct flavors or spices to your kraut, then the kraut becomes the star and becomes less useful — you can't put it in as many things. So I like to make my kraut basic and plan to add the aromatic ingredients later.

After mixing the salt in, you just pound the kraut. I use a mallet that my friend Lynn Atkins made for me. This is step something you'll see when people make fermented pickles of any kind. You have to bruise the cellular walls to get everything started.

This is one of the reasons kraut making is great for kids. My kids are nine. They can work this food processor (just make sure that you watch them). They can also measure the salt, stir the cabbage, and then pound the cabbage. And the rest of the steps are perfectly manageable for them, too.

This is a kitchen project that does not involve heat. It is a kitchen project that continues to evolve, and you get to follow it. So I guess what I'm trying to say is it's a science project.

Back to pounding. While I use a fancy mallet, you could use a wine bottle, a rolling pin, anything. You get the picture.

After pounding, we let the ingredients hang out for about 15 to 20 minutes, and it's going to start to leach out its water. And the water combined with the salt is going to make its very own brine. After this time, you'll be able to see that it's shrunk, it's giving up some liquid, and it's darkened in color. With this, we then pack it into whatever you're going to ferment it in.

Containers + Tools

I think that a lot of people don't think that at-home fermentation is for them, because they think they have to buy a bunch of gadgets to make it happen, or they think that it's going to be really easy to do something wrong. And that's just not been my experience at all. In making kraut in a restaurant setting, often we'll put the cabbage that's been rubbed with the salt in a Lexan and put a sheet pan on top of that. But I'll also put it in jars or in a bowl, with a weight. It does not have to be the perfect earthenware croc for you to make kraut.

For example, with a quart jar — you'll just cram your kraut in here. It is really important that you get as much in there as you can. My basic kraut recipe is one medium head of cabbage and one large English cucumber — and I find that that particular measurement, once it's pounded, fits in two quart jars. And I always think, before I have pounded it: *It's never going to fit in here.* It's another thing my kids enjoy: this part of pushing it down.

With a bowl, you would just need to put it in the bowl, put a plate on top (a plate about the diameter of the bowl), and then put a weight on top of that plate. This weight could be a jar with water in it. You could put a paperweight on top of that. But the point is that you want to weight the vegetables down below the developing brine.

A couple of years ago, I got this cool kit on Amazon. I'm pretty sure I Googled "fermentation kit." In the kit was a weight, which is basically like a paperweight, but it fits perfectly inside a jar. Also in the kit was also a little nipple thing that covers the jar, keeps anything unwanted out of it, but also lets air escape.

If you don't have these two little gadgets, there's a lot of other options — and I've been known to do all kinds of wild things. You could fill a little jar, with water, put its lid on it, put it right on top of your other jar and your vegetables. A lot of times, when I don't have the nipple tool, I will cover the top with cheesecloth and cure it with a rubber band, or twine, or whatever. You could use a dishcloth.

The point is the kraut needs to breathe. It doesn't need to run in the wind or anything, but it needs to be able to breathe. And it needs to be weighted down below the brine.

Where to Ferment

So what I like to do, when I'm at this stage, is put the kraut in a place that my family and I pass by every day, but that is not in a window. I have made kraut before and put it in a cabinet, just to get it out of the way, and then find it far too late for anybody to enjoy it. So I like to put it somewhere that we pass by a lot so that, as a family, we can check it out, smell it, taste it, and, most importantly, don't forget about it.

In about 12 hours, you could check it, the brine should definitely come over top the kraut and maybe even over top the weight. If that has not happened and you find that there's not enough brine to submerge the kraut, you can mix a solution of 2 teaspoons salt and 1 cup of water and pour that on top. You don't want to pour straight water. You need to create a brine as it does need to be submerged.

I get a lot of questions like: *If there's a little bit of mold or fuzz on top of my kraut, as it's developing, what do I do?* The answer is if it's a very thin layer and it's part of while the kraut is developing, just scoop that off and throw it away.

Funky Fermenting

I then usually start tasting my kraut after about four days.

The interesting thing, from a chef's perspective, is that when we think of fermented foods, we think of the most fermented product. It's got to be funky. It's got to be in your face. But there's all different levels within that spectrum. Four days and this tastes like a bright, quirky pickle. 8 to 10 days in, it tastes more robust and funkier. And then 15 days in, it's that full-level funk that I think we associate with fermented foods.

But what I want you to know is that, even on day two, this tastes different. It has different qualities. It has acid. It has salt. It has brightness. It has crunch. And those things develop, through the fermenting process, until some of them start to level out, and other things take over. But kraut is not a beginning and end process. I like to taste it all along the way and use it for the things that it is most useful for at that stage.

I know that with *Fermentology*, you're learning a lot about the *how* to do this. I would like to talk to you a little bit about the *why* you should do it. And I think we all understand fermented foods to be really good for our gut, good for our health, good for a hangover. But I don't think that we necessarily think of how to cook with them.

And that's kind of what my book is about in the kraut chapter. This chapter shows you how to make kraut, the ways that you can pack it if you don't have certain equipment, a lot of no-brainer ways to use it, and then a bunch of recipes that, once you have your kraut, what you should do with it.

For example — pickle sickles! I don't know if any of you have had pickle sickles in your past. But I used to go to this roller rink in Kinston, and they sold pickle sickles, which was leftover pickle juice that they just froze. And that was my favorite thing to get. So we make that with kraut juice.

And it's so interesting. My daughter's kind of a super taster, and when she tasted a pickle sickle from fermented kraut, she said: *It tastes like wine*. I'm like: *That's so smart*. And this was made from kraut that we've taken to the end spectrum. It's fully fermented, fully funky. The whole room smells like it.

Eating your Kraut

You can have an omelet that has kraut and Swiss cheese inside — and the kraut gives it a nice texture and a brightness. And you can also put poppy seeds on top. So consider kraut with eggs and kraut on avocado toast. We're always looking for something a little crunchy on top of that avocado toast, always looking for acid on top of it. Think of kraut in that way.

Kraut and apples are a classic European combination. I have a recipe where kraut gets folded into pancakes and cooked there — and then you have the texture, and the brightness, and the funk that they bring. And then it's topped with fried apples.

One of my favorite recipes in the book is called “Dinner for Pregnant People,” because when I was pregnant, I craved pickles. Well, I craved chicken sandwiches from Chick-fil-A, with extra pickles on them, and baked potatoes. And so this recipe is kind of a re-imagination of that. It's chicken that's roasted with baked potatoes, and kraut is underneath it. So I take this kraut, put it underneath a chicken, and roast the chicken. It cooks the kraut in the chicken juices, and it's amazing.

You can also put kraut juice in a Bloody Mary.

For my kids, their favorite dish is a macaroni hot dish. It's basically macaroni, ground beef, cheese, broccoli, and kraut. And I've made it with or without the kraut, and they prefer it with the kraut because they say it tastes a little bit better, and I can tell you why. Because in this dish, there's a lot of really heavy, rich flavor: the beef, the cheese, the macaroni. The kraut, it hides in there and adds balance in the form of acid and texture. So it's a great way to hide this in your food.

I also use kraut in a salsa on burritos and any kind of creamy soup, like a chowder. I feel like we all love chowders. When it gets cold outside, it's something really comforting. But I find that when I get to the bowl of my chowder, I'm really over it. And folding a little bit of kraut into a chowder, as it simmers, adds that brightness and that acidity — that funkiness that something like chowder, I think, actually needs.

I also love kraut and steak together. I love steak salad. So tossing kraut into a salad dressing and having it on a steak salad makes that steak taste so much better, because what kraut brings, what a lot of fermented foods bring, is balance, acidity, and texture. It's one of my favorite ingredients in the kitchen.