

Meet the unlikely food hero

A trend is taking the food world by storm: fermentation. Before you turn the page or dismiss it as a niche obsession among bearded foodies in East London, think of a world without chocolate, coffee, salami or cheese. Or, for that matter, wine or beer. All the result of fermentation. And now meet author and food activist Sandor Katz – the man who believes the transformative power of microbes goes way beyond a jar of sauerkraut

WORDS SUSAN LOW

The crowd in the lecture hall are getting restless. The speaker, Sandor Katz, is late. The train from Devon, where he'd spent the day with Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, is delayed, running hours behind schedule. The tension mounts. People whisper "Do you think he'll make it?" Finally, a cheer goes up: "He's here!" Sandor Katz – at last – is in the house.

It's a reception more in keeping with an evangelist preacher, but the bewhiskered Katz is not here to talk to his congregation about the afterlife, he's come to the Westminster University lecture hall in London to deliver an eloquent talk on microbial life – more specifically fermentation. Instead of brimstone, there's a faint whiff of sauerkraut in the air.

Katz is the author of two top-selling books on his pet subject, *Wild Fermentation* (2003) and *The Art of Fermentation* (2012), and is regarded as a leading authority in the fermentation movement – a movement that's on the rise.

Current fashionable foods miso and kimchi (both produced by fermentation) grace the menus of top restaurants from New York's Momofuku to Copenhagen's Noma. The rise of fermented foods has been spotted by newspapers around the globe from *The Guardian* to the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. And at the centre of any discussion about fermented foods, you're likely to hear Sandor Katz namechecked.

Yet despite the build-up to his stage appearance (complete with mutton-chop whiskers worthy of an Edwardian circus barker), Katz is down to earth. His talk – part Women's Institute demo, part university lecture – relates the story of how a taste for the sour dill pickles of his New York City Jewish upbringing set him on a path of discovery to the food obsession that was to become his life's work.

As he rolls up his sleeves, then salts and mixes by hand a massive



SO BAD IT'S GOOD
Pickled cabbage?
It's fermenting,
not rotting

3 REASONS WHY FERMENTATION IS GOOD

PRESERVATION

Fermented foods last longer.

IMPROVED NUTRITION

Fermentation is a kind of 'pre-digestion' that makes some foods easier to digest and/or makes the nutrients in food easier for the body to absorb.

EXCITING FLAVOURS

Fermenting develops depths of flavour, adding complexity to coffee, chocolate, cured sausage, cheese... Then there's wine, beer, whisky... It makes life tastier.

"For all we've gained with convenience food, there's a lot we've lost"

plastic bucket full of shredded cabbage, he speaks passionately about "the transformative action of microorganisms", and about how fermentation creates many of the flavours humans have grown to crave, from cheese to chocolate and from fish sauce to coffee. He talks lyrically about how the preservative qualities of fermentation have aided mankind's survival in harsh climates, and about health benefits: "Simply put, fermentation makes food more nutritious and easier for us to get nourishment from."

Equally, Katz, who is HIV-positive, is keen to downplay some of the frothier fringe ideas that surround the 'fermento' movement. Fermentation isn't a panacea for the dietary ills of the world: sauerkraut can't cure Aids; eating miso will not hasten the end of fast food or solve the world's food-security issues.

At the end of the talk, Katz fields questions from the audience, such as what role salt plays in making sauerkraut and what to do if it goes mouldy ("scrape it off"). Afterwards, lecture-goers swap sourdough starters and yogurt cultures, and I feel chuffed to score a kombucha scoby. No, not a bit of merchandise from a sci-fi film; that's fermento-speak for a Symbiotic Colony of Bacteria >>

PHOTOGRAPHS: THINKSTOCK, SEAN MINTER (PORTRAIT)



THE CULTURE SHOW Sandor Katz demonstrates the magic of microbes

and Yeast – a starter culture used to make kombucha (fermented tea) or traditional ginger beer.

When I meet Katz in person at a later date, I find him easy-going, articulate, a born teacher – and passionate about his subject. Playing devil’s advocate, I ask whether fermented foods really matter as much as he thinks they do. “Everywhere I’ve ever been, fermented foods are part of people’s everyday lives,” he answers. “As part of the most standard British

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diet you’ll eat bread, cheese, beer and a whole load of vinegar-based condiments. You don’t have to be a foodie or particularly health-conscious; fermented foods are part of your life. They’re relevant to everybody’s lives, whether they’re interested in making them or not.”

Yet fermentation has in recent years become a trend. Why? And why now? “If you count things like bread, cheese, wine and vinegar, fermentation has never really waned,” he replies. “But, like all aspects of production in the 20th century, household and local-community producers were superseded by production in factories, which coincided with an all-out war on bacteria. We’ve all been indoctrinated to believe that bacteria are scary. And, over a couple of generations, there’s been an enchantment with the idea of convenience food.”

But Katz believes things are changing. “People are becoming

more aware. For all we’ve gained from convenience food, we now realise that there’s a lot we’ve lost,” he says. “We’re eating food of diminished nutritional quality, and it’s produced by methods that are economically destructive. There’s been a lot of interest in getting close to the source of food and understanding where it comes from. Fermentation is just part of the process. Anyone interested in where food comes from has to start thinking about fermentation.”

It’s clear Katz’s thinking goes much further than merely passing on the knowledge for creating the perfect sauerkraut. “It’s essential we reclaim our food and retain access to the skills to grow and produce food for ourselves,” he concludes. “It doesn’t mean everyone has to do it or that it’s a crime to shop in a supermarket or buy a ready-meal, but if we lose all those skills, and people only know how to do it in the mass production context, we are losing something essential.”

So although that batch of homemade pickled cabbage may seem pretty simple, how it was made is what matters. By rolling up our sleeves and getting stuck in, we can all play a role – be it ever so small – in choosing what we eat and how we live. And that’s a recipe we could all do with. 

WANT TO GIVE IT A GO?

Sandor Katz offers these words of wisdom:

VEGETABLES ARE AN EASY, SAFE WAY TO START “It doesn’t have to be sauerkraut – you can do the same thing with any kind of vegetable and the process is pretty much the same.”

REMEMBER IT’S NOT ROCKET SCIENCE “People have been fermenting food for thousands of years on this planet without the benefit of microbiology or microscopes.”

LET GO OF THE FEAR “Many people project their generalised fear of bacteria onto this process. The fact is, if you take a raw vegetable and ferment it, it’s safer to eat after you’ve fermented it than it was before.”

YOU DON’T NEED SPECIAL EQUIPMENT The ingredients list for Katz’s classic recipe for sauerkraut lists just three things: cabbage; salt; spices. That’s it. You’ll also need a large ceramic crock or a food-grade bucket, a plate, a scrubbed and boiled-clean rock (or other weight) and a clean pillowcase. Find the full recipe online at: wildfermentation.com/category/sauerkrautrecipes

RECOMMENDED READING

If you do catch the fermentation bug and want to try your hand at ginger beer, say, or yogurt, wine vinegar or a sourdough bread starter, Sandor’s first book, **Wild Fermentation: the Flavor, Nutrition and Craft of Live-culture Foods** (£17.99; *Chelsea Green Publishing*) is a must-read. And if you *really* get hooked? Try his **The Art of Fermentation** (£28; *Chelsea Green Publishing*). It really is a fascinating read [the book even made it onto the *New York Times Best Seller* list].

