

From Cabbage to Sauerkraut
By Ora Emmerich
UCCE El Dorado County Master Food Preservers
For Print January 14, 2011

Ahh...there's nothing like a little sauerkraut on a bratwurst to make tailgating perfect. What? It's not tailgating season yet? Then you still have time to make and preserve homemade sauerkraut. If you grow cabbages, some may be ready for harvest right now. The University of Georgia has a wonderful guide to making your own sauerkraut. Just go to http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/how/can_06/sauerkraut.html. The Master Food Preservers in El Dorado County will have a class on making sauerkraut as part of their summer series on Safe Home Food Preservation. For more information about the public education classes and activities, go to the Master Food Preserver website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Food_Preservers/.

Just what exactly happens to cabbage to change it into sauerkraut, and who figured that out? Well, the process, called fermentation, begins when naturally occurring bacteria in the cabbage react with salt over time to form lactic acid, which results in the food we know as sauerkraut. According to the University of Minnesota Extension office, "Salt is a critical ingredient for fermented products. It helps to prevent undesirable bacteria from growing instead of the naturally present, desirable bacteria that produces lactic acid. Keeping the correct temperature during the fermentation is also important to be certain that the desired bacteria grow and produce the needed acid and flavor compounds." The salt preserves the cabbage, while lack of air during the fermenting process also helps prevent the "bad" bacteria from growing. The resulting product, after about 5 weeks of optimal temperature and conditions, tastes great on any sausage!

Even though "sauerkraut" means "sour cabbage" in German, the first known instance of cabbage fermentation used rice wine and began in China. Workers on the Great Wall of China ate cabbage fermented with rice wine because it did not need to be kept refrigerated to be preserved. When people in Europe began to ferment shredded cabbage with salt, in its own juices, sailors discovered that this easy to preserve food kept scurvy at bay as well as citrus fruits did. European immigrants to the United States brought sauerkraut with them, and enterprising Germans sold sausages, rolls and sauerkraut from pushcarts in New York to earn money. There you have it, hot dogs and sauerkraut!

Even better, recent research into the medicinal uses of sauerkraut shows promising benefits from a diet which includes the tangy cabbage. Dorothy Rybaczyk-Pathak, PhD, from the University of New Mexico conducted a study which seems to have found some breast cancer-fighting effects from sauerkraut, or lightly cooked cabbage. The benefit of inhibiting breast cancer seems to be increased if the sauerkraut has been part of the diet since adolescence, but it also helps at any age.

In addition to a very high level of vitamin C, sauerkraut aids digestion by introducing good bacteria into the digestive tract. Many people believe that the phytochemicals present in sauerkraut help to fight disease and promote good health. Sauerkraut, a favorite folk remedy, takes the credit for soothing nerves, preventing constipation and increasing the general feeling of well-being. Total Omega-3 fatty acids for sauerkraut,

46.9 mg. per serving, come close to a 1:1 ratio with the total Omega-6 fatty acids of 48.3 mg. per serving. With only 27 calories per cup, and no fat, sauerkraut can complement any diet.

Here is a great recipe from the University of Oregon Extension Service:

LAZY DAY POT ROAST

1 tart cooking apple, cored and thinly sliced
2 cups sauerkraut, rinsed and drained
1 lean boneless chuck roast, about 3 lbs.
¼ cup firmly packed light brown sugar
1⅞ ounce envelope onion gravy mix or brown gravy mix*
1 (28 ounce) can tomatoes

Slow Cooker Directions:

Place apple slices in bottom of slow cooker. Remove visible fat from roast. Cut roast in half and place on top of apples. Add tomatoes, sauerkraut and brown sugar. Cover tightly and cook on high 1-2 hours. Reduce heat to low. Cook 5-6 hours or until meat is tender. Skim off excess fat. Stir in gravy mix and heat, covered, 15 minutes. Stir once or twice. Yields 6-8 servings.

*Can also thicken with flour and water mixture and season with beef bouillon or au jus mix.

If you have any questions about safe home food preservation, be sure to call the Master Food Preservers and leave a message at (530) 621-5506. A Master Food Preserver will get back to you with an answer.