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KITCHEN BAR



nosh

Pronunciation: \nāsh\

Yiddish, To snack or eat on the sly

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# Lively Ferments

Naturally fermented food is an age-old preservation tradition the world over. So how did it become such a hot trend? Join the culture club.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

**W**e're sitting in **Urban Farm Fermentory's** cavernous tasting room at the warehouse headquarters on Anderson Street in Portland's industrial-hip epicenter: East Bayside. The floor is cement; the bar is made of salvaged pallet lumber (speaking of trends). There are two rows of taps in front of us, none of them beer. These are

ciders, meads, and kombuchas.

Kombucha is a naturally fermented beverage containing "good" bacteria that are beneficial to human digestion; it's slightly fizzy and contains 1.5% alcohol by volume. UFF is among the very few kombucha producers that do not pasteurize (heat) the beverage, which kills the alcohol and the live ferment. UFF's Kombucha is "probiotic," and probiotic food and drink is cutting-edge healthy, whereas pasteurized, mass-market kombucha is little more than a feel-good soft drink.

We sign on for flights—"four picks for \$3"—and choose an assortment of flavored kombuchas and ciders, which are also fermented and a bit higher in alcohol—more

Right, top: Nosh's reuben sandwich is spiked with their house-made sauerkraut. Below: A flight of flavored kombuchas at Urban Farm Fermentory.

FROM TOP: PETER BISSELL; MEAGHAN MAURICE



like 6.5%.

“The flavors are all from locally grown or foraged things,” says bartender Lilia Garcelon. “So there can be flavor variations from batch to batch.” She delivers paddle boards with four small jars of colorful liquid nested in each. A sip of ginger kombucha is bright and refreshing. Mountain mint is subtle and earthy rather than mouthwash-flavored. Blueberry tastes of real Maine berries, and, like all of UFF’s offerings, it’s noticeably unsugary. A sip of roasted tomato kombucha is improbably savory and tasty, but our next selection is not. Seaweed cider is about as close as you can get to accidentally swallowing seawater at the beach.

“We distribute as far as Massachusetts and Vermont,” says operations manager Luke Finnemore. Locally, find UFF’s beverages at Whole Foods, Aurora Provisions, and the Rosemont markets. Or pick up a growler right at the Fermentory, where you can request your own flavor mix. “Blueberry-ginger is big,” says Garcelon.

#### EVEN ON THE HALF-SHELL

At **Eventide Oyster** on Middle Street, where the servers are all good-looking and the food is way above average, the menu is shot through with Asian influences—there’s *dashi* chowder, fried mussels *nam prik*, and Thai fried chicken to name a few. Kimchi—once known as a fiery pickled cabbage condiment for Korean food—is made here for use as a garnish and as a side dish. Half-inch ribbons of green cabbage, carrot matchsticks, and shredded onion are “salted down, then rinsed and drained,” says a prep cook who is garnishing whole lobster tails in their shells behind the counter. “Then it’s seasoned with Korean chili paste, ginger, and a few other things, and fermented for a few days.”

Three feet away, a tall, willowy woman with a ponytail is serenely shucking oysters.



Kimchi ice is the new cocktail sauce for shellfish at Eventide Oyster.

“They put a bit of shrimp paste in the kimchi, too,” she says.

This is spicy stuff in the range of cayenne heat, with a sour tang that comes from fermentation rather than vinegar, and one heck of an aftertaste.

You can have kimchi ice on your oysters here. It looks like a little cup of coral-colored sorbet, but it has more zing and nuance.

Kimchi is all over town—in the Japanese creations at **Pai Men Miyake**, even on the “Seoul Dog” hotdog at the **Blue Rooster**.

#### FERMENTING VS. PICKLING

Like sauerkraut, kimchi is lacto-fermented. It’s made in a simple, traditional fermentation process that involves no vinegar or sugar. Instead, starches and sugars in the vegetables are converted into lactic acid through the fermenting process. Lactic acid is a natural preservative that prevents rotting, which is why kraut and salt-brined pickles last so long. Modern food processing introduced vinegar as a pickling/preservative, which is fine but lacks the digestive benefit and adds no healthy “flora” to your intestinal tract.

Miso is another probiotic food created

through the lacto-fermenting of grains and soybeans. The **Rosemont** markets—a good source of assorted fresh fermented food and drink—carry a fresh, unpasteurized light miso made in Canada in the fridge case. The container has a recipe on the side for a salad dressing made with miso. No longer confined to the hot cup of broth that precedes a sushi meal, miso is widely used in or on roasted meats, sauces, noodles, and other dishes now.

#### FARM FRESH FERMENT

Live, fermented, digestion-friendly foods are big business at the farmers’ market in Deering Oaks on Saturdays.

**Thirty Acre Farm** has a shelf of jars—“Ferments—\$7/\$12,” reads a handwritten sign. They’ve got sauerkraut, jalapeno-spiked kraut, and bright red “ruby kraut.” There are jars of fermented carrots and bottles of fermented hot sauce.

Dairy farmers have displays of unpasteurized, old-fashioned yogurt—it’s full-fat, rich, and delicious, with cream on top. At **Swallowtail Farm’s** stand, you can choose fresh classic style, Greek-style, or fruit-flavored cow’s-milk yogurt





## HUNGRY EYE

sold in glass jars. There is even kefir, a probiotic dairy drink that looks like milk but is said to be more refreshing. And apparently quite popular. The kefir sells briskly at Swallowtail's busy stand. "It's a really good drink," says owner Sean Pignatello, who is also a cheesemaker.

"Yep, Irish/Italian," he says of his name. Is this why he was drawn to making cheese? "It's not why, but it's why I'm good at it!" Suffice it to say, if you try his yogurt and ricotta salata, a second-place winner in a national cheese competition, you'll buy some.

Nearby, David Buchanan is making fruit smoothies at the **Old Ocean House Farm** stand. He's whirring up his own fresh berries with a bit of yogurt from Balfour Farms in Pittsfield. Buchanan is the author of *Taste, Memory*, about the value of heirloom fruits and vegetables. He uses apples from his Pownal orchard to make dry ciders he sells under the Portersfield label. "I ferment the fruit about six months," he says. The Anconia (berries and apples) flavored cider is not a dessert-wine novelty. "It's dry and astringent—drink it like you would a rosé." He's right—this cider, tinted pale pink from the berries, is delicious and subtle.

### WASHINGTON COUNTY WISDOM

"I don't know how, but it's taken off," says Rachel Bell of **Tide Mill Creamery**. She's talking about kefir. "I gave it a try seven years ago, and I loved it. It's much more like yogurt than milk in taste—effervescent, with a fizzy tang." Bell and her husband Nate Horton operate Tide Mill Creamery on a large, extended-family farm in Edmund, a hamlet between Machias and Calais.

"We make cheese and yogurt here; we have cows and goats. We raise pigs and sell whey-fed pork. When we started producing kefir, we wanted to do it the traditional way. You put culture into cow's milk, and we use nice glass bottles. Digestive benefit? Oh, yeah, way more than yogurt." She says kefir actually contributes positive microbes that can stay in your digestive system. "My dad had terrible stomach problems and took medication for years. Now he feels great and just drinks kefir every week; it seems to have cured it."

Tide Mill also produces and distributes sauerkraut, kimchi, yogurt, and their Little Bloom camembert-style cow/goat cheese statewide. Find it at the Rosemonts and **Portland Food Coop**. ■



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