

slightly during fermentation. Be sure to close the jars very tightly. Lacto-fermentation is an anaerobic process and the presence of oxygen, once fermentation has begun, will ruin the final product.

We have tried to keep these recipes as simple as possible without undue stress on ideal temperatures or precise durations. In general, a room temperature of about 72 degrees will be sufficient to ensure a lactic-acid fermentation in about two to four days. More time will be needed if your kitchen is colder and less if it is very warm. After two to four days at room temperature, the jars should be placed in a dark, cool spot, ideally one with a temperature of about 40 degrees. In days gone by, crocks of lacto-fermented vegetables were stored in root cellars or caves. A wine cellar or small refrigerator kept on a "warm" setting is ideal; failing that, the top shelf of your refrigerator will do. Lacto-fermented fruit chutneys need about two days at room temperature and should always be stored in a refrigerator.

Lacto-fermented vegetables increase in flavor with time—according to the experts, sauerkraut needs at least six months to fully mature. But they also can be eaten immediately after the initial fermentation at room temperature. Lacto-fermented vegetable condiments will keep for many months in cold storage but lacto-fermented fruits and preserves should be eaten within two months of preparation.

Some lacto-fermented products may get bubbly, particularly the chutneys. This is natural and no cause for concern. And do not be dismayed if little spots of white foam appear at the top of the pickling liquid. They are completely harmless and can be lifted off with a spoon. The occasional batch that goes bad presents no danger—the smell will be so awful that nothing could persuade you to eat it. The sign of successful lacto-fermentation is that the vegetables and fruits remained preserved over several weeks or months of cold storage.

Lactic-acid fermented vegetables and fruit chutneys are not meant to be eaten in large quantities but as condiments. They go beautifully with meats and fish of all sorts, as well as with pulses and grains. They are easy to prepare, and they confer health benefits that cannot be underestimated.

Scientists and doctors today are mystified by the proliferation of new viruses—not only the deadly AIDS virus but the whole gamut of human viruses that seem to be associated with everything from chronic fatigue to cancer and arthritis. They are equally mystified by recent increases in the incidence of intestinal parasites and pathogenic yeasts, even among those whose sanitary practices are faultless. Could it be that in abandoning the ancient practice of lacto-fermentation and in our insistence on a diet in which everything has been pasteurized, we have compromised the health of our intestinal flora and made ourselves vulnerable to legions of pathogenic microorganisms? If so, the cure for these diseases will be found not in vaccinations, drugs or antibiotics but in a restored partnership with the many varieties of *lactobacilli*, our symbionts of the microscopic world.