

# Front Range Fermentos



Local entrepreneurs see fermented veggies as superfoods

BY EILEEN DOLBEARE

**M**ilan Doshi sits in a small, verdant city garden of 110 edible plants that straddle the yards of the two Victorian homes he owns in Denver's Five Points neighborhood.

He gestures to the old cellar where he stores cabbage and smiles, "Fermentation is about preservation. It's a connection with God and the earth. It's a gift."

He's talking about sauerkraut.

An organic chef and owner of the Queen Ann Bed and Breakfast in Denver, Doshi started Five Points Fermentation in 2011. His company provides Coloradans with local, hand-crafted, raw fermented

vegetables, including two varieties of sauerkraut, which he dubs Soul Kraut and Curry Kraut.

Doshi is one of a host of Front Range fermenters who are reintroducing the thousands-year-old traditional practices of preserving vegetables through lacto-fermentation. Marni Wahlquist of Vital Cultured Foods in Fort Collins is making Masala Carrots and two kinds of kraut. And Mara King and Willow King (no relation) of Esoteric Foods in Boulder have a line of pickled vegetables called Zuke that includes everything from a beet, hijiki seaweed and kale combo to their own version of kimchi, the flavorful Korean blend of cabbage, onions and seasonings.

Photo by Rebecca Scamporrino





Lucien and Willow King at work.

Author and food activist Michael Pollan recently contributed a foreword to the book *The Art of Fermentation* by Sandor Katz, a self-avowed “fermentation fetishist” and one of America’s best-known fermenters. Pollan wrote, “To delve into the world of fermented foods is to enter the community of fermentos, who happen to be a most interesting, eccentric and generous bunch.”

Front Range fermentos are as alive and interesting as the nourishing, living bacteria called *Lactobacillus* that’s found in their cultured vegetables. They’re insiders in a loop of culinary lore that most of us have lost.

For thousands of years, our ancestors made and ate cultured foods. Early fermentation references can be found in everything from the Bible to the first known Chinese poetry volume. Esoteric Foods nods to this past with the company tagline “historically inspired, future forward food.”

The Russians drank a fermented tea called kombucha; Asians created soy sauce and miso, Germans made sauerkraut; Indian families cooked dosas and idlis, or fermented rice cakes. And even Americans used to eat fermented ketchup. The bottled ketchups of today’s American markets, including the organic varieties, are no longer fermented. They’ve been concocted with heat and vinegar in the name of a longer shelf life. All the raw power has been stripped out.

Fermentos are bringing us back to our culinary pasts to preserve tradition and boost our health. They’re offering a supplement to an American diet that’s been de-nutritified, processed and boxed.

“Fermented foods enhance the nutritive value of any food you eat them with, because they help break down other foods,” Wahlquist says sipping a cup of tea at the Happy Lucky Teahouse in Fort Collins. “Some cultures eat up to 40% fermented foods, including beverages. Their foods have a life force to them.” She started Vital Cultured Foods in 2012 to “create fun things to share with the community in a nourishing way.”

Lactic-acid fermentation is one of the simplest forms of food preservation. For optimal fermentation, a mix of raw vegetables, liquid and salt are steeped without oxygen. There’s no heat and no vinegar. It’s a natural process by which carbohydrates are converted to carbon dioxide, alcohol and acid.

Making fermented vegetables is low-tech and won’t break a budget. “Take vegetables and salt and pack them tightly in a container,” Wahlquist explains. Fermentation can be done in glass Mason jars or traditional ceramic crocks like the ones Wahlquist uses.

“You don’t have to seal it, but I do. Allow time to ferment for the transformation to begin,” she says. “The first couple of days there’s a battle going on between the good and bad bacteria. After a few more days, the good bacteria proliferate and grow their colonies.”

Mara and Willow King started Esoteric Foods in 2011, believing that “fermentation makes sense in a fundamental way. It’s what we already have in our bodies and fermented foods are a natural way to augment it.”

Colonies of localized microbial cultures are present in each fermento’s unique setting and methods, and they’re always different. “We create our own lineage of pickles,” adds Willow

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[fivepointsfermentation@gmail.com](mailto:fivepointsfermentation@gmail.com); [denverferments.com](http://denverferments.com)  
 Front Range Fermentos.docx **Find it in Denver:** City Park Esplanade farmers’ market, Marczyk’s Fine Foods, Truffle Cheese Shop and in several restaurants in the Front Range.

**Marni Wahlquist; Vital Cultured Foods**, Fort Collins  
[marni@vitalculturedfoods.com](mailto:marni@vitalculturedfoods.com); [vitalculturedfoods.com](http://vitalculturedfoods.com)  
**Find it:** Larimer County farmers’ market, Fort Collins Food Coop and Beavers Market in Fort Collins, Alfalfa’s Market in Boulder

**Mara King & Willow King; Esoteric Food Company**, Boulder  
[esotericfoods.com](http://esotericfoods.com) **Find it:** Boulder County farmers’ market, Alfalfa’s Market, Back to Basics Kitchen, Cured, Dish Gourmet, Lucky’s Market and Boulder’s Whole Foods Market.

Author Katz explains on his website, [wildfermentation.com](http://wildfermentation.com), "What you ferment with the organisms around you is a manifestation of your specific environment, and it will always be a little different."

Every person has her or his own bacterial makeup as well, which will influence their fermentation results.

Adds krautmeister Doshi, in making these foods "we get introduced to a world coated in bacteria. Fermentation is essential in staying healthy in a society that typically reaches for processed foods. It's also how we're able to reconnect with our surroundings because these foods are meant to be consumed in their own region,"

"We kill everything today with canning," says Mara, sitting at a Boulder park picnic table as her young son plays happily with dandelions and sprinklers. "Our approach is to keep food alive and have it interact with you."

"We like the super healthy, raw power of these foods. It's good medicine," adds Willow. "If people get this in their diets, they feel good; we feel good because lacto-fermented foods are true nutritional powerhouses—aiding in digestion, rich in enzymes that help us absorb food nutrients, maintaining the bacterial balance in our guts—which helps combat constipation, diarrhea, Irritable Bowel Syndrome, colitis and ulcers.

The fermentation process also increases the vitamin content in food. "Captain Cook took sauerkraut on his voyages because it's so high in vitamin C," Wahlquist says of the 18th century explorer who lost no crewmen after he brought kraut on board.

Lactobacillus is a common type of natural probiotic, high on the radar of the health-conscious. Store shelves are stocked full of probiotic supplements in the forms of pills, powders and liquids. Eating fermented foods would be an easier, more natural way to increase probiotic intake. "Your body knows what to do with a pickle more than a pill," says Willow.

Doshi agrees. "There's no medicine or pill that can do as much for you. In the time it takes to go to the store and buy probiotic supplements, someone could have made their own yogurt."

Fermentos are as mission-driven as they are health-conscious. As Pollan notes, they're generous.

Across the street from his B&B, in the shadow of Denver's "Type-writer Building," Doshi runs Moon Dog Farm. It's 15,000 square feet of fertile city land he uses to cultivate the produce used in his "Denver-made, Colorado-grown" fermented products.

Doshi has dreams of a food preservation center in Five Points where he'll teach community classes on fermentation, create a café that serves all things fermented and "be the heart of fermentation in a food desert." He gives back by working with students at Denver's Fairview Elementary, who are growing jalapeños for an upcoming



Mara and Willow King of Esoteric Foods.

product, currently under wraps. It's his way of teaching the kids about gardening and commerce.

Both Vital and Esoteric Foods source their organic produce from local farmers—Wahlquist with nearby Native Hill and Grant Family Farms; Esoteric with Boulder-area farms including Black Cat and Cure and produce from Grower's Organic, Colorado's only fully organic wholesale distributor. For variety, they'll source crops from their local farmers' market, creating seasonal fermented specialties.

"It's all another way to keep the local food economy strong," Wahlquist says.

It's clear Front Range fermentos are making deep connections in our community, between the past and present, farms and food, our bodies and bacteria—all through the "gift" of lacto-fermentation.

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Eileen Dolbearé is a freelance writer from Boulder and mother of three boys with another son on the way. To read more on how she's introducing even more bacteria into their lives, visit [familyfresh.blogspot.com](http://familyfresh.blogspot.com).