

Homemade Sauerkraut

By Justin Peterson for Blooming Junction

STEP 1: GATHER SUPPLIES.

Equipment

kitchen scale
cutting board & knife for slicing cabbage
large mixing bowl
measuring spoons
quart (liter) wide-mouth canning jar or similar sized jar
fermentation weights or 4-ounce (125 ml) “jelly” canning jar
wide-mouth plastic storage cap (Or, use the metal rim and lid that comes with the jar.)

Ingredients

1 medium head fresh green cabbage,
2½-3 pounds total
1 tablespoon (15 ml) iodine-free salt
(fine-grained)

STEP 2: CHOP!

- You will need 1¾ pounds (28 ounces, 800 grams) of chopped cabbage. This is the perfect amount of cabbage to mix with 1 tablespoon of salt to create the right saltiness of brine to ensure perfectly fermented sauerkraut. And, it’s the perfect amount of sauerkraut to pack into a 1-quart jar. If you want to add other veggies for flavor (such as carrots, ginger, radish ect) make sure the total weight of other veggies plus cabbage equals 1 3/4 lb.
- Discard the limp outer leaves of the cabbage, setting aside one of the cleaner ones for use at the end.
- Quarter the cabbage, leaving the core in. The core helps hold the layers of cabbage together, making the slicing job easier.
- Place a cabbage quarter on one of its sides and slice the cabbage crosswise. I like thin ribbons; you may like a coarser texture. Just keep in mind that narrow ribbons will ferment more quickly than wider cut ribbons. If you’re looking for a handy tool, I recommend buying a wide mandolin (such as a Benriner) for slicing cabbage into thin slices.

STEP 3: CREATE BRINE in which your sauerkraut will ferment. For this you need salt. Salt pulls water out of the cabbage and vegetables to create an environment where the good bacteria (mainly lactobacillus) can grow and proliferate and the bad bacteria die off.

- Sprinkle vegetables and cabbage with 1 tablespoon (15 ml) of salt and mix well.
- Massage and squeeze the vegetables with strong hands until moist, creating the brine.
- You should be able to tilt the bowl to the side and see a good-sized puddle of brine, about 2–3 inches in diameter. This process can take anywhere from 2 to 10 minutes.

STEP 4: PACK JAR. Now that you have a puddle of brine, it's time to pack the cabbage mixture into your jar.

- Pack cabbage mixture into jar, periodically pressing the mixture down tightly with your fist or a large spoon so that the brine rises above the top of the mixture and no air pockets remain.
- Be sure to leave at least 1 inch of space between the top of the cabbage and the top of the jar. Because we weighed out just the right amount of cabbage to fit in your jar, this should happen automatically.
- Pour any brine left in your mixing bowl into the jar and scrape out any loose bits stuck to the sides of the bowl.
- Lastly, wipe down the outside of the jar and push down any tidbits on the inside of the jar that may remain above your packed ferment.

STEP 5: Submerge and SEAL. Now make sure your fermenting mixture is in a safe anaerobic (no air) environment. This means that you need to keep the cabbage mixture submerged in the brine while it ferments. Air is bad for the fermenting sauerkraut and can enable the bad bacteria to grow and proliferate, creating mold and other undesirable by-products.

- Take that cabbage leaf you saved in Step 1, tear it down (or trace the jar lid and cut cabbage leaf to size.) to just fit in the jar.
- To prevent bits floating to the surface, place your torn cabbage leaf over the surface of the packed cabbage.
- To hold the vegetables below the brine, place a fermentation weight (we sell 'Pickle Pebbles in our store specially made for this) or a 4-ounce jelly jar on top of the cabbage leaf, right side up with its lid removed.
- Lightly screw the white plastic storage lid onto the jar, somewhat loose so CO₂ gases produced by fermentation release. Pour out excess brine if necessary.

STEP 6: FERMENT 1-4 WEEKS.

- Place your jar of fermenting sauerkraut in a shallow bowl (to catch the brine that may leak out during the first week of fermentation), out of direct sunlight. The ideal fermentation temperature is between 65 and 75°F (18–23°C). The lower the temperature, the slower the fermentation. The higher the temperature, the faster the fermentation. Ideally, you want the temperature to be somewhat stable, not fluctuating more than 5 degrees in either direction.
- The first week is when you'll see the most action in the jar. The mixture will get bubbly and the brine will rise in the jar, likely seeping out from under the lid. Your home may even start to smell like sauerkraut!
- During this first week, keep an eye on the level of the brine. It will rise and fall with the temperature in the house. If the lid is bulging or you don't see brine seeping out, carefully loosen

the lid just a tad, stopping the second you hear gases escaping or see liquid seeping. Should the brine level fall (very unlikely) and remain below the level of the sauerkraut during this first week, dilute 1 tablespoon of salt in 2 cups of water and pour some of this brine over the sauerkraut (removing the little jar first) until it just covers the mixture. Put the little jar back in, screw the lid on lightly and let the fermentation continue.

- Don't worry if the brine disappears after the 7- to 10-day mark. By this time, you've created a safe environment in which the bacteria that would cause mold or slime has been chased away by the beneficial bacteria produced during the fermentation process.
- At the 1-week period, open the jar, pull out the small jar, and smell and taste your sauerkraut. At this point, you can decide to start eating it or let it ferment for bit longer. You can ferment your sauerkraut for up to 4 weeks. The longer you ferment it, the greater the number and variety of beneficial bacteria that can be produced. Research that I've come across indicates that bacteria numbers peak at 21 days. Keep that in mind, but ferment for flavor. You have to like the stuff to eat it. I suggest that people ferment their first jar for 1 week, and then the next jar for 2–4 weeks, tasting it at 1-week intervals to determine the level of tang and crunch they personally prefer.

STEP 7: STORE. After fermenting your sauerkraut, it's time to move it to the refrigerator and is ready to be eaten. Refrigeration slows the fermentation process to the point where you won't notice significant changes in texture.

- Rinse off the outside of the jar.
- Take the weights or little jar out.
- Clean the rim if necessary (sometimes it can get sticky from the brine that overflows), and screw the lid back on tightly.
- Enjoy a forkful or two of your sauerkraut with your meals. It will continue to ferment – aging like a fine wine – but at a much slower rate than before.
- If the flavors are too intense, leave it – in your refrigerator – for a month or two and then sample it. You will be amazed at how the flavors have changed. If successfully fermented (tastes and smells good), your sauerkraut can be kept preserved in your refrigerator for up to a year.