



“We have to learn how to keep a good relationship with the microbes inside and around us”

AUSTIN.

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dossiercreative.com | @dossiercreative | Vancouver, Canada

Austin Chisholm is a creative copywriter at branding agency Dossier Creative. When a client asked him to write a book about the past, present and future of fermentation – a topic he was already passionate about – it started a journey of discovery that changed his perspectives on food, health and nature.

Interviewed by **Wilco van Bommel**

Q: Where does your interest in fermentation come from?

Before starting my research for the book, I didn't know much about the science of fermentation. However, I was already curious about it, and I had some experience making kombucha, soy yogurt, and sauerkraut, both at home and at a vegan restaurant I used to work at. Writing the book gave me the chance to follow my curiosity and apply my academic background in critical theory to study the history of fermentation.

Q: What did you discover from studying this history?

To start, fermentation has been with us since before we were even human. Our prehuman ancestors would have eaten rotten or fermented fruit from the ground, like monkeys and apes sometimes do. In the ancient world, people relied heavily on bread and alcohol. But they weren't sure exactly what was going on. They just saw something bubbling and knew it was a good sign. For example, ancient philosophers likened fermentation to matter rising to its fullest potential. Like grapes bubbling up to perfection as wine.

What I find so fascinating is that the story of fermentation is also the story of humankind. We evolved to have a taste for fermented food and the ability to digest it. By learning how to control fermentation, we were able to preserve food and not have to forage every time we were hungry. It allowed us to settle down, live with livestock, ferment milk into yogurt and cheese, and so on. In almost every civilization, bread or some kind of alcohol were culturally significant, brining people together through rituals and traditions.

Q: Why is there such growing attention for fermentation today?

I think this has much to do with recent interest in the human microbiome, the community of microbes that live on and in our bodies. We used to think that all these microbes, bacteria, fungi, and viruses were bad for us, and we tried to kill or get rid of them. Today we realize we really need them for our mental and physical health, and that they likely have some impact on the prevalence of depression, Alzheimer's, anxiety, obesity, diabetes, for example.



Austin hosts workshops, encouraging people to experiment with fermented food.

The science behind this dates back to the early 1900's, with the work of Élie Metchnikoff. He was intrigued by why Bulgarians apparently lived longer. He thought it was the yogurt they consumed. His explanations turned out to be wrong, but he was right that yogurt is good for our gut health. His work helped us realize we can't just pasteurize all our food.

Q: What new big ideas are emerging related to fermentation?

One recent idea I'm really interested in is planetary dysbiosis. This is the idea that the microbial balance of our body is not isolated, but connected with that of the planet. Human actions have caused pollution, soil degradation, climate change and deforestation. And because of that, our planet's microbiomes have become imbalanced too. Therefore, healing our bodies and healing the environment are connected. This is a real paradigm shift. We have lost our connectiveness to nature, and we are now faced with the need to correct that.

Q: Precision fermentation is a new technology that gets mentioned more and more. What is this exactly?

This is a kind of biotechnology using microbes to brew proteins without the use of animals. Some companies are starting to use this technology to make products like microbe-based dairy and "animal" protein. As a new direction for fermentation, it might help minimize reliance on animal agriculture, which on a large scale is not sustainable at all. I'm not sure yet how I feel about precision fermentation. It's definitely an exciting possibility, but there's still a lot we have to learn.



Q: How has researching fermentation changed your own thinking? Has it made you more optimistic about the future?

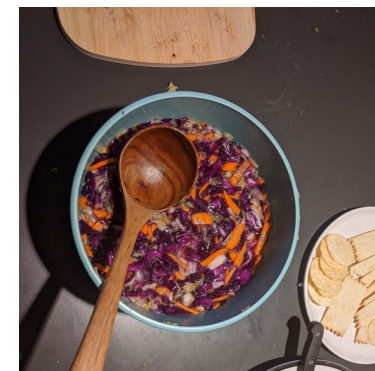
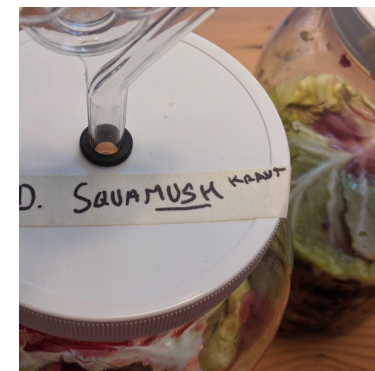
Yes, it has definitely changed me. Ever since starting my research for the book, it has been hard not to think about fermentation. And it changed how I see things. I always thought microbes are along the ride with us, inside our bodies. But now I think it might be the other way around. We are along for the ride with them!



“These days, when I’m in a bad mood and not feeling great, I wonder if maybe my microbes are having a bad day!”

As for the future, I’m cautiously optimistic. Of course, the microbes will be just fine. They adapt quicker than we do, and will likely cope better than us with all the ways we’ve messed up the planet. For us humans, I hope that we will see the problem ahead of us. We need to build healthy societies, healthy relationships between the planet, nature and our bodies. I think incorporating fermentation into our personal lives is a small, first step.

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ABOUT THIS DIALOGUE

In this provocative series on the need for new approaches to food, we question misconceptions about food systems, and discover how ‘frontrunners’ in different regions have successfully challenged outdated food paradigms and behaviours.



W: dunefield.ca/food
IG: [@wearedunefield](https://www.instagram.com/wearedunefield)
E: food@dunefield.ca