

# From kimchi to kombucha, younger diners treasure tart food and beverages

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Sweetness is out of vogue as younger generations embrace tart, complex flavors.

**By Bill Ward** Special to the Star Tribune

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Fermented foods like kimchi are becoming more popular and more widely available. Chef Ann Kim sells her version at Pizzeria Lola.

When it comes to matters of taste, age matters.

Tart flavors are finding great favor with the under-50 set in everything from candy, condiments and breads to beer, cocktails and teas. Think kimchi, kombucha and kumquats. Think anything fermented. Think "how sweet it isn't."

Millennials and Generation Z have embraced the kinds of sour and bitter foods and beverages that other generations were never exposed to during their formative eating and drinking years.

"We have moved away from that intensity of sweetness," said Melissa Abbott, vice president of culinary insights at the Hartman Group, a consumer-insights firm based in Bellevue, Wash. "Our diets are less sweet, and less dominated by fat and salt."

Why the generational gravitation? Several factors come into play, Abbott said, including more cultural diversity — "there are more people who are not white in the younger generations," she noted — which spawned more culinary diversity. And an increase in Asian travel, and the proliferation of sour-dish-laden Asian eateries on these shores, has had a ripple effect with a generation that puts so much stock in word of mouth (or text).

Younger folks also have a different, and perhaps stronger, predilection for healthy fare. Abbott cited the way kimchi sales skyrocketed a few years back when it made headlines about possibly warding off avian flu. But this healthy mind-set has since become more holistic.

"We've really seen the health and wellness context change," Abbott said. "We've moved away from the culture of the '80s and '90s, when so much was about weight loss. It's no longer about torturing yourself, but more 'it tastes good, it tastes different and exciting, but also it's good for me.' The culture of wellness is driving this. And the funkier the taste, with the younger consumer there's a cachet."

The probiotics movement and home-brewing craze furthered this trend, which kicked into overdrive when the pandemic hit and homebound hordes began concocting batches of kimchi, sourdough, hops-happy beer and other fermented delights.

Certainly, it's not just the tastes of younger generations moving in that direction. They just had a major head start.

Growing up with sugar-laden candy and soft drinks, plus far-from-piquant offerings — even the items with "sour" in the name (sweet-and-sour pork, whiskey sour) lacked the requisite acidic kick — today's boomers and seniors had little exposure to the foodstuffs and beverages that are prevalent today. They were well into adulthood when pungent products like Sour Patch Kids started dominating candy aisles and Asian restaurants proliferated along Eat Street in Minneapolis and University Avenue in St. Paul.



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Kimchi tops the Lady Za Za pizza at chef Ann Kim's Pizzeria Lola in Minneapolis.

### **Nurture, not nature**

But that doesn't mean palates have changed genetically. In fact, said Johan B. Ubbink, head of the University of Minnesota's Department of Food Science and Nutrition, we all start with a super-sweet base.

"Every newborn likes sweet and fatty foods," he said. "Mother's milk tastes sweet, and typically other foods [that infants consume] are sweet, providing a little energy."

Starting with a base of what food scientists call intrinsic taste, we gradually encounter the other four taste receptors — sour, bitter, salty and umami — en route to our acquired taste.

"You only learn through exposure," Ubbink said. Coffee is one example. "At first people don't like it," he said.

Part of our taste evolution is figuring out not only what we like but what's safe. The sweets of our youth are easygoing, but we're on high alert when it comes to other flavors, particularly bitterness.

"Bitterness gives rise to a strong reaction," Ubbink said, "like 'Hey, this might be toxic.'" One distinction, he added: "Bitterness is something that tends to linger for a while. Sour is tangy, often gone very quickly."

Well, sometimes. There's also something about foods we might perceive as sour that actually does linger.

"Fermented foods can be really acidic but are not just sour," Ubbink said. "Something like sourdough is not just sour. It also brings more complexity. There's much more awareness and acceptance of complex food throughout the United States."

## **Flavor faves**

That complexity is what consumers such as 30-something Reid Plumbo of Vadnais Heights is seeking. For him, that revelation came at, of all places, the Surly Taproom in Brooklyn Center.

As a teenager, he had taken a sip of Summit IPA and called it "the most bitter, horrible thing you've ever tasted." As a young adult, he took a chance on Surly Furious.

"It was super bitter, like your jaw felt like it was seizing shut," he said. "But it also had piney, citrusy, really good hop flavors. That's when I realized there's more here than being bitter."

"It's the same with food. There are some foods that are spicy but have no flavor," he said, citing the mega-hot sauce Da' Bomb. "In cooking, you can use citric acid if you don't have lemons, but you'll never get that lemon flavor."

Plumbo dove into the world of fermented food and drinks, experimenting with different levels of hops in home brewing and pickling not just cucumbers but radishes and other vegetables. He tried all manner of cheeses; his favorite is Tillamook Extra Sharp Cheddar from Oregon.

"It passes that test," he said. "It has all of these secondary flavors."

## **The bitter non-end**

And now the culinary world is geared toward the palates of Plumbo and his peers. Supermarkets stock exponentially more yogurts and aged cheeses, and spirits emporiums offer up an unprecedented raft of uber-hoppy beers and harsh-ish "orange wines."

Restaurants, meanwhile, are much more likely to include fried green tomatoes and dishes with kimchi (up 59% in the past five years). And that's not even counting the emergence of coffee shops with a raft of bitter libations — and Filipino cuisine, in which sourness is a defining characteristic, at restaurants such as Apoy in Minneapolis and Manila Sizzling Wok and Grill and Pinoy Fusion in St. Paul.

The ever-wider range of snappy foods and beverages means that today's Sour Patch (non) Kids will have boundless opportunities to pursue this passion.

"There's more interest in different flavors and textures," Ubbink said. "What I believe to be important overall is that we as humans, our biology makeup, we thrive on a diversity of foods and complex foods. It really fits well to eat diverse."

## Then and now

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My, how tastes have changed. Here's a sampling of foods favored by boomers in past years vs. younger generations today:

Cheese curds — Aged Gouda and goat cheese

Wonder bread — Sourdough

Chow mein — Pho

BLTs — Fried green tomatoes

Pudding — Probiotic yogurt

Ketchup — Kimchi

Mayo — Miso

Paprika — Tamarind

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Melons — Mangoes

Relish — Pickled veggies

Smoothies — Kombucha

Lagers — Hoppy IPAs

Chardonnay — Orange wines

Piña coladas — Negronis



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Traditional Korean kimchi starts with Napa cabbage.

## **Fried Green Tomatoes**

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Serves 6.

Note: Once only a Southern staple, this classic dish is prevalent locally, too. Recipe adapted by Bill Ward from "Aunt Bee's Mayberry Cookbook," a 1991 collection of recipes that highlights the flavors of the fictional town depicted in "The Andy Griffith Show."

- 2/3 c. instant flour, such as Wondra, divided
- 1 1/2 tsp. kosher salt
- 3/4 tsp. paprika
- 3/4 c. buttermilk
- 1 large egg white
- 1 1/2 tsp. hot sauce, such as Louisiana or Tabasco
- 3/4 c. finely ground cornmeal
- 3 unripe green tomatoes (about 1 1/2 lb. total), cut into slices 1/4-in. thick
- 1/2 c. canola oil

- Shredded Parmesan cheese, optional

## **Directions**

In a shallow dish, whisk together 1/3 cup flour, salt and paprika. In a separate shallow dish, whisk together the buttermilk, egg white and hot sauce. In a third shallow dish, stir together the cornmeal and remaining 1/3 cup flour.

Place a wire rack in a rimmed baking sheet. Prepare the tomatoes by dipping each slice in the flour first, then buttermilk, and finally cornmeal. Place the breaded slices on the wire rack in a single layer.

Over medium-high heat, heat the oil in a large cast-iron skillet. Carefully fry the tomatoes in batches until golden-brown, about 3 to 5 minutes per side. Transfer to a paper towel-lined plate. Repeat until you've fried all the tomatoes.

If desired, sprinkle the hot tomatoes with Parmesan cheese before serving.

## **Larry Colbeck's Cucumbers**

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Serves 4.

Note: From Minnetonka's Larry Colbeck, these cukes are a wildly popular staple, especially with Colbeck's dry-rub ribs, at trade events at his wholesale operation the Wine Company in St. Paul. Double or triple the ingredients for a party — the extras will last for several days in the refrigerator. This recipe needs to be made in advance.

- 1 English (hothouse) cucumber, seeded and cut into small bits.
- 2 tsp. salt
- 1 c. rice wine vinegar
- 1/2 c. sugar
- 1/2 tsp. of Chinese chili sauce

## **Directions**

Spread the cucumber bits out on a plate and sprinkle with salt and let sit for an hour.

Put the rice wine vinegar, sugar and chili sauce in a saucepan and bring to a boil. Simmer for 5 minutes, then remove from heat and let cool.

Rinse the cucumbers, pat dry and add to the sauce.

Let the cucumbers marinate in the sauce at least an hour before serving.

## Boulevardier

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Serves 1.

Note: A take on the classic Negroni, this drink is known for balancing bitter, boozy and sweet. It also works with gin, rum or vodka instead of whiskey.

- 3 tbsp. (1 1/2 oz.) rye whiskey
- 1 1/2 tbsp. (3/4 oz.) Campari
- 1 1/2 tbsp. (3/4 oz.) sweet vermouth
- Orange slice, for garnish

### Directions

Stir whiskey, Campari and vermouth ingredients with ice, then strain into a glass. Garnish with an orange twist.

## Traditional Korean Kimchi

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Makes 2 quarts.

Note: This recipe, from author Amy Thielen, first appeared in the Star Tribune in 2012. This whole-leaf napa cabbage kimchi can be cut just before serving. Recipe adapted from Minam Morris of S & S Outlet & Asian Market in Solway, Minn.

- 1 tbsp. sesame seeds
- 1 large napa cabbage
- Coarse sea salt or kosher salt (about 1/2 c.)
- 1/3 c. gochugaru (Korean pepper powder), or 1/4 c. paprika and 1 1/2 tbsp. cayenne pepper
- 1/4 c. fish sauce
- 1/3 c. hot water
- 1 tbsp. minced fresh ginger
- 1 1/2 tbsp. minced garlic
- 1 large carrot, julienned
- 1/2 unpeeled Asian pear (or tart apple), julienned



- 4 green onions, trimmed and thinly sliced

## **Directions**

**To toast sesame seeds:** Heat them in a dry pan over low for a few minutes, until fragrant and slightly brown, stirring occasionally.

Cut the napa cabbage in quarters, leaving the root end intact, and rinse well in a large bowl of water. Drain, shaking dry. Rub each leaf with salt, opening the leaves as you go. Pile the salted quarters into a large container and let rest for 1 to 2 hours, or until the leaves taste salty. Rinse the cabbage well and press it to remove excess water.

In a large bowl, combine Korean pepper powder, fish sauce and hot water, and mix well. Add ginger, garlic, carrot, pear, green onions and sesame seeds; use your hands to combine it thoroughly.

Spread a little of this red paste on each of the cabbage leaves and around the outside, as well. Fold each quarter into a tidy bundle and lay in a nonreactive (plastic or glass) container in which they will fit snugly. Spread the remaining paste over the cabbage and pack it into the container. Press a sheet of plastic wrap to the surface, and cover. Leave to ferment at cool room temperature for 3 to 7 days, until pleasantly sour. Move to the refrigerator and store for a couple of months or until it grows too strong for your taste. Highly fermented kimchis are rescued by cooking, and often find their way into stews flavored with big slabs of meat.

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