How to Choose the Best Fermented Foods with Live Cultures

Two Key Reasons Why the Japanese Live Longer—and What You Can Do About It

By Robert Ferguson

Across the globe, Japan stands out—not for its gyms or fitness fads, but for its impressive longevity, low disease rates, and overall metabolic health. Only about 3% of Japanese adults have a gym membership, yet they enjoy:

- An obesity rate of ~4%
- An Omega-3 Index of 9–10%
- An average lifespan of 84.5 years
- A healthspan (disease-free life) of about 74 years

In contrast, the United States, where 19% of adults hold gym memberships, faces:

- An obesity rate of over 40%
- An average Omega-3 Index below 4%
- A life expectancy of 76.4 years
- A healthspan of just 66 years

One key factor in this disparity? Fermented foods and omega-3-rich diets.

The Forgotten Power of Fermented Foods

Fermented foods are rich in **probiotics**—live, beneficial bacteria that help keep your gut microbiome in balance. Unlike probiotic supplements, these bacteria come naturally from the fermentation process and are embedded in whole foods your body recognizes and absorbs efficiently.

These living microorganisms can:

- Support digestion and nutrient absorption
- Strengthen the immune system
- Enhance mood and brain function through the gut-brain axis
- Help regulate weight and blood sugar by stimulating **glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1)**, a hormone that promotes satiety and insulin sensitivity
- Produce short-chain fatty acids, essential for gut lining and metabolic health

But here's what many don't realize: fermentation used to be a way of life in the U.S. too.

Before industrialization and refrigeration, fermenting food wasn't a trend—it was a survival skill. It kept food from spoiling and enhanced its nutrition.

American households once made:

- Sauerkraut from garden cabbage
- Pickles from salt brine—not vinegar
- Buttermilk, sourdough, and fermented relishes
- Root-cellared vegetables that slowly fermented over time

These practices naturally introduced probiotics into the daily diet. Today, most store-bought foods are **pasteurized**, **preserved**, **and sterile** leaving your gut underfed and out of balance.

Look for "Live and Active Cultures" on the Label

Just because a food was fermented at some point doesn't mean it still contains living probiotics.

This is especially true for **yogurt** and **cottage cheese**. Many people assume they are probiotic-rich, but that's not always the case. While both are made using bacterial cultures, most commercial brands are **pasteurized or heat-treated after fermentation**, killing off any live bacteria. Others are flavored with excessive sugar or contain additives that offer little to no benefit for your gut.

If you're looking for a probiotic-rich option, choose brands that clearly state they contain **live probiotic strains added after pasteurization**—and list them on the label.

This is especially true for **yogurt**. Many people assume all yogurt is probiotic-rich, but that's not always the case. Some yogurts are **pasteurized or heat-treated after fermentation**, killing off the beneficial bacteria. Others contain **more sugar than soda**, which can feed harmful microbes.

If a product doesn't clearly say it contains live and active cultures, it likely doesn't.

Look for labels that say:

- "Contains live and active cultures"
- "Unpasteurized"
- "Raw and fermented"
- Specific strains (e.g., Lactobacillus acidophilus, Bifidobacterium lactis)

Warning labels like "heat-treated after culturing" indicate the probiotics are dead.

Are There Label Laws to Protect You?

Yes, but they're minimal.

The **U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)** requires that yogurt be made with two bacterial strains (*Lactobacillus bulgaricus* and *Streptococcus thermophilus*), but manufacturers can legally heat-treat the product afterward, destroying any live cultures—if it's disclosed.

For other fermented foods like kombucha, kimchi, sauerkraut, kefir, pickles, or miso, **no federal regulation** mandates listing live cultures, probiotic amounts, or fermentation method.

Bottom line: Just because it says "fermented" doesn't mean it has live cultures.

How to Spot the Real Thing

When shopping for fermented foods:

- Avoid shelf-stable, vinegar-based products (especially pickles)
- Choose items from the **refrigerated section**
- Check for labels that mention live and active cultures
- Choose products with simple ingredients (like cabbage, salt, water)
- Avoid chemical preservatives (like potassium sorbate)

What Japan Still Gets Right

Fermented foods are still a **daily staple** in Japan. Meals often include:

- **Miso soup** (fermented soybeans)
- Natto (probiotic-rich fermented soy)
- Fermented vegetables like tsukemono

These habits support digestion, nutrient absorption, and immune health.

The Omega-3 Connection

Japan's high intake of **omega-3-rich foods** significantly contributes to their high Omega-3 Index—a key marker of reduced inflammation, improved cellular function, and better metabolic health.

While fish such as **mackerel**, **salmon**, **sardines**, **and tuna** are foundational sources, the Japanese also consume omega-3s from other sea-based foods, including **snails**, **shellfish**, **seaweed**, and **omega-3-enriched eggs**. Their traditional diet is naturally diverse in omega-3 fatty acids, specifically eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA).

Most Americans, by contrast, fall below 4% on the Omega-3 Index. Ideally, levels should be **8–12%** for optimal health.

If fish and sea-based foods aren't part of your routine, consider supplementing.

Why I Recommend BalanceOil+

BalanceOil+ is a scientifically formulated omega-3 supplement that combines:

- Wild-caught eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA)
- Polyphenols from unripe olives to prevent oxidation
- Support for cell membrane fluidity and nutrient exchange

It helps restore your Omega-3 Index and supports everything from hormone signaling to mitochondrial function.

How to Make It a Habit

Start small:

- Add 1-2 tablespoons of raw sauerkraut to a meal
- Have **unsweetened kefir** with breakfast
- Stir a spoonful of **miso** into warm broth (not boiling)
- Eat a couple forkfuls of kimchi with lunch or dinner
- Drink **low-sugar kombucha** if you like it, but be cautious—many of these probiotic soda-type drinks are heavily marketed and may not offer the same value as real fermented foods

Then, pair it with BalanceOil+ for a powerful one-two punch to support your gut and cellular health.

Final Thoughts

If you want to reduce inflammation, improve energy, and age well, learn from Japan:

- Eat real fermented foods with live cultures
- Maintain a high Omega-3 Index
- Limit over-processed and ultra-pasteurized foods when possible—while not every food needs to contain live cultures, relying too heavily on sterile, shelf-stable products can leave your gut undernourished
- Use **food as medicine**—not marketing hype

Want to Know Where You Stand?

You can begin implementing fermented foods into your daily habits. You now have a better understanding of how to read labels and what to look for, so once you find something that works for you, take action.

And when it comes to your Omega-3 Index, there's no need to guess. Start with an at-home BalanceTest to see where you are. You likely won't be eating fish one to two times a day like people in

Japan, which is why supplementing with BalanceOil+ is such a practical solution. It's what I use and recommend.

Take the BalanceTest again after four months to confirm that your Omega-3 levels have improved—not just assumed. That way, you'll know with confidence that BalanceOil+ is working.

Feel free to contact the person who shared this article with you, email me directly at <u>robert@dietfreelife.com</u>, or <u>click to schedule a free consultation</u>. I'm here to answer your questions and provide personalized guidance.

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