



RUMBLINGS

ANDREA BURGNER

BACTERIA RULES

I don't think one can trust people who are obsessed with household hygiene. There is something so stupefyingly drear (and at the same time barking mad) about it. If you're going to have an obsession, let it be about good underwear or taming bees or making the ultimate salami. Or even serial killers, really. Household hygiene? No food for the brain or soul there. Of course, everyone would prefer not to live surrounded by filth and disease, but we are pathologically microbe-phobic. We always fret about the wrong thing. In our particular urban scenario, you're more likely to be taken out by an oncoming car or obesity, than you are by anything invisible in your house. We have forgotten how to love (the good) bacteria; all but the post-Pasteurians, as they call themselves. This group in America is engaged in a gastro-political battle with a supremely bacteria-phobic government for the right to make and sell food and drink teeming with microbes, from funky-ripe vegetable pickles to cheeses made from raw milk.

We need more people like them. Humans have had a glorious and symbiotic relationship with microbes since we met up with them on the planet. If they were more visible, the food writer Michael Pollan reckons they might have been thought of as man's best friend, long before dogs got the title. Only in very modern times have we had a food industry which, both deliberately and inadvertently, is all about annihilating anything that smacks of "germ". This is very



bad news indeed. Microbes make up about 1kg of our weight, and we're dead without them. In our antiseptic world we should be actively striving every day to take in microbes from all around. I'm not suggesting a good lick of the floor when you wake up (though if you use one of the anti-bacterial floor cleaners perpetually being advertised you might as well not bother), but getting more microbes into your tummy is certainly something to strive for.

Without microbes there would be no

fermented foods at all. Imagine that if you can. Nobody would have discovered the making of natto, kimchi, sauerkraut, beer, mead, and a thousand other fermented wonders. It's true that modern pickling and preserving recipes usually skip the process of using bacteria for a true fermentation and use a host of different short-cuts, but none of the ideas for these edibles would even be around if microbes had not shown us the way. Old-style is best, for health, but reality often gets in the way. Of course there are some traditional fermentation practices that are happily left behind: anyone up for trying the ancient (still practised) South American recipe for spit and corn-based beer? Stage one in the recipe involves heartily chewing the corn to break down the cells with the ptyalin so usefully present in human spit. The spat-out mush is then ready for fermenting. Interesting.

Even if you're not pickling the bacteria-rich way, there is another damn good reason for being fond of preserves: they are the perfect solution to an energy-low future. They were invented pre-refrigeration after all, so can continue without it. The post-energy world doesn't look too far away anymore, so get thee learning the art of preserving. With a cellar full of beer, miso, rhubarb jam, Japanese radish, kimchi, Tabasco, apple chutney, pickled onions and pickled meat (OK, skip the pickled meat), you are well set, even for a pretty bleak post-apocalyptic scenario. You need only make some bread (another product of bacteria and ferment of course) to live a fridge-free life in happiness.

THIS WEEK



My grandmother's kitchen shelves groaned with bottles of preserves — fruit being her speciality — and I remember the beautiful orange glow of cling peach cheeks immersed in clear syrup and the translucent purple hue of catawba jelly. All so tempting, but her idea of enjoyment was to admire her produce as a display — actually eating it was saved for really special occasions, of which there were too few for our liking.

Hilary



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NEXT WEEK



Jasmine is blossoming and heaters are going into storage until next winter. We hail the start of warmer weather with a fresh green feast to lift the heart.

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FIND OF THE WEEK

BLOOMING MARVELLOUS

In 1998, a young Australian tour guide playfully dropped a crimson wildflower into his champagne flute at a dinner party. Lee Etherington knew the wild hibiscus buds were edible, because he'd eaten them as a dessert garnish. What he didn't know was how they would behave in a glass of sparkling. He and his friends watched in amazement as the

champagne bubbles streamed across the flower, making its petals unfurl in the style of a speeded-up nature movie.

Fast forward to 2014: The Etheringtons now farm acres and acres of these pretty plants and export Wild Hibiscus Flowers in Syrup to more than 30 countries around the world, where they feature on menus in the fanciest bars, hotels and restaurants. Scores of cocktails have been invented for the edible blossom, with its subtle rhubarb and raspberry flavours, but the favourite way to



eat it is still at the bottom of a fine glass of bubbly.

• Wild Hibiscus Flowers in Syrup are available at La Marina Foods (7 Platinum Drive, Longmeadow North Business Park, Modderfontein, Johannesburg, 011 608 3277, www.lamarinafoods.co.za), where you will also find a wide range of delicious delicatessen products. A jar containing approximately 12 flowers costs R120 and comes with a mini recipe booklet.

THURS 19:30

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