



Legend of the Kefir Grains

So, where did kefir come from, and what exactly is this wonder culture? The origins of kefir are somewhat shrouded in mystery. Perhaps forming by spontaneous wild fermentation, kefir has been used for more than 2,000 years by the long-lived inhabitants of the Caucasus Mountains. This extensive mountain range, the dividing line between Europe and Asia, is one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse places on Earth. The Muslim peoples of the Caucasus considered the kefir grains a gift from God, a sacred food. Grains were passed down from generation to generation; to this day, people in Tibet enjoy a breakfast of kefir cultured in yaks' milk and flavored with salt. I cannot help but feel connected to this process when I consider that my grains come from such a long tradition of honor and care.

The precious grains, often referred to as "jeweled grains," were brought to Russia; the legend of the journey is a story filled with romantic intrigue, involving a Caucasus prince and a beautiful girl. From there they have traveled westward ever since. The grains themselves are not true grains, but are a gelatinous matrix of bacteria consisting of various strains of friendly yeasts and lactobacilli, lipids, sugars and proteins.

There are two varieties of kefir grains: milk and sugar. Milk kefir grains are cultured in a medium such as cow, goat, sheep, yak, nut, or soy milk. They transform ordinary milk into a slightly effervescent, slightly sour beverage that is much higher in gut-friendly microorganisms than yogurt (a cultured dairy product with which most of us are familiar).



Photo Courtesy of Tia Ohm

Milk kefir grains are opaque, pale cream to yellow in color, and resemble cooked cauliflower. As they feed, they produce more grains over time.

Sugar kefir grains, also called water kefir, feed on a mixture of sugar and water, often with dried fruit added for additional flavor and trace minerals. These grains are similar to milk kefir but do not have the same bacterial complexity. They are smaller in size, and transparent in appearance. Sugar kefir results in a beverage that is fizzy like soda, but unlike the high fructose corn syrup drinks on the market, this tasty treat is full of enzymes and probiotics. It's a favorite of our children, and even the sweet neighbor kid who is a known picky eater.

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Dr. John M. Ferguson, DC
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