Fermented Hot Sauce

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Fermentation is one of the oldest food preservation techniques. Naturally occurring healthy bacteria (the most common is lactobacillus) break down carbohydrates and sugars in vegetables, converting them into acid. The acidic environment and the lack of oxygen prevents harmful bacteria from growing. Simultaneously, the process creates tangy, savory flavors. This is a fun recipe because it's all to taste - you get to decide along the way how you want it to go. Consider it more of a guide than a recipe!

1. Prep the chilis

- You can use any chilis, or a blend of whatever is available. If you use hotter chilis, you will get hotter sauce.
- 1 pound of peppers will yield about 1.5 - 2 cups of hot sauce, depending on what else you put in.
- Cut off the stems and any not-quite-fresh bits.
- A lot of the capsaicin (what makes chilis hot) is in the veins (the pith that connects the seeds). If you want a mild sauce, remove them. If you want it spicy, leave them all in. Removing the seeds is up to you. Faster to leave them in, and if you don't like them you can strain them out after fermentation.
- Optional: you can add other vegetables to enhance the flavor: carrots for sweetness, onions for umami, garlic to ward off vampires. Sweet peppers too!
- Chop everything into 1 inch chunks. It doesn't have to be perfect.
- Put the vegetables in a jar big enough so they sit about 2 inches below the top.

2. Make the brine.

- You need a 3% brine. Don't eyeball this part - weigh your ingredients. For every 100 grams of water, use 3 grams of salt. Don't waste your fancy sel gris on this - good old table salt is great. You need enough brine to cover the chilis by one inch.
- For a pound of vegetables, you'll want about two cups of water (480 g water, 15 grams salt).
- Whisk the water and salt together until the salt dissolves.

3. Ferment!

- Pour the brine over the vegetables. You want to make sure the vegetables are covered completely.
- Weight the vegetables so they stay covered: the easiest way is to open a ziploc baggie, put water in it, and press it over the top of the vegetables, smooshing out the air bubbles.
- Put the jar in a cool dark place for at least a week. Check on it every so often to make sure the chilis are still submerged. You might see bubbles forming, that's great! It's carbon dioxide, and means the bacteria are doing their job.
- Fermentation is the most active in the first 1-2 weeks, but you can go as long as you want - even several months. You can taste it along the way to see how it changes. Once it reaches a taste you like, you can put it in the fridge to slow it way down.

4. Blend and season

- Strain and reserve the brine.
- Put all the vegetables in a blender, blend to the desired texture. You can strain it to get the seeds out if you want.
- To make it thinner add some brine or 1-3 T vinegar (I use apple cider vinegar).
- Optional: add herbs like oregano or cilantro, and spices like cayenne or chipotle.
- Add salt to taste.
- Funnel into clean glass jars or woozy bottles, and store in the fridge. WIll be good for 1 - 2 years. If it molds or smells weird, toss it.