

Kefir Grains vs. Kefir Starter Culture?

From the Cultures For Health Website: www.culturesforhealth.com

Bacteria Strains

One way in which kefir grains and kefir starter differ is in the number of strains of beneficial yeast and bacteria available through the starter culture. Generally speaking, powdered kefir starter has 7 to 9 strains depending on the particular brand of starter. Milk kefir grains generally and water kefir grains each have around 400 strains (including subspecies), making kefir grains the more nutrient-dense method for making kefir.

Reusability

Kefir grains are reusable, and with proper care can be used to culture batch-after-batch of kefir. The kefir grains are simply placed in milk or sugar-based liquid, allowed to culture, then removed and placed in new milk or sugar liquid. A small amount of the kefir made with powdered kefir starter can often be reserved and added to fresh milk to make a new batch of kefir. Generally it can be recultured several times before the bacteria weaken significantly. The number of times powdered kefir starter can be recultured is dependent on a few factors including the freshness of the milk, hygiene, and how quickly the kefir is recultured.

Culture Care

Another way in which kefir grains and kefir starter differ is how the cultures are cared for. Kefir grains can turn out a new batch of kefir every 18 to 48 hours, but to keep them healthy, they must be cared for each day and switched out to new milk or sugar-based liquid every 18 to 48 hours. Small batches (1 to 2 cups) can be made if it becomes difficult to keep up with consuming the kefir being made.

Powdered kefir starter is well suited for individuals who do not wish to make kefir regularly. Kefir starter is kept in packets in the refrigerator or freezer and when kefir is desired, a packet of starter is simply added to the milk and allowed to culture. As stated above, kefir starter can often be recultured a few times before the bacteria weaken significantly. Powdered kefir starter can be ideal for a family that is traveling and can not maintain a daily regimen using fresh grains, for instance.

Cost

While kefir grains are more costly upfront, over time kefir grains are the far more economical option since they are truly reusable and can turn out a new batch of kefir every 18 to 48 hours.

Bottom Line

We generally recommend kefir grains as the most natural, economical, and nutrient-dense way to make kefir. However, it is not always practical to maintain kefir grains on a daily basis and therefore in situations where it is more practical to make kefir only periodically, we recommend opting for the powdered kefir starter.

What Is the Difference between Milk Kefir & Yogurt?

Many people assume that because yogurt and milk kefir are both cultured dairy products, there isn't much difference between the two. This is not true. There are many differences between yogurt and milk kefir, including how each is made, the types of bacteria present in each, and the flavor and consistency.

Starter Type

There are two types of [yogurt starter](#): *mesophilic* and *thermophilic*. Mesophilic means that the yogurt starter is cultured at room temperature.

Thermophilic means the yogurt starter is heat-loving, and cultures at around 110°F, in a yogurt maker or similar appliance.

Milk Kefir is a *mesophilic* culture, which means it cultures at room temperature.

Propagation

There is also a difference in how each starter is propagated. Reusable yogurt starters, once activated, are recultured by mixing a bit of a previous yogurt batch into fresh milk. Once the new batch is complete it becomes the starter for the next batch, and so on. Yogurt cultures generally require reculturing once each week.

Direct-set, or single-use, yogurt starters come in powdered form, and are usually *thermophilic*. Each new batch of yogurt requires a new packet of starter. While this type of yogurt may be re-cultured a few times, at some point a new packet of powdered starter will be required.

Milk Kefir, on the other hand, is cultured using [milk kefir grains](#). The "grains" are actually a gelatinous mass harboring a generous variety of bacteria and yeast from which one can make continual batches of kefir. Milk kefir grains should be transferred to a fresh batch of milk about every 24 hours.

Milk kefir can also be made from a [powdered kefir starter](#), similar to the direct-set yogurt culture. Powdered Kefir Starter Culture may be re-cultured a few times using kefir from the previous batch, but eventually, new powdered starter will be required.

Types of Bacteria Present

Yogurt and milk kefir contain different types of bacteria, each of which performs different tasks.

The beneficial bacteria found in yogurt help keep the digestive tract clean and provide food for the friendly bacteria found in a healthy gut. They pass through the digestive tract and are called *transient* bacteria. A chart listing the bacteria strains found in each of our yogurt starters may be found [here](#).

The bacteria in milk kefir, on the other hand, can actually colonize the intestinal tract. Kefir also contains a lot larger range of bacteria, as well as yeasts. For more information on the bacteria generally known to comprise milk kefir grains, click [here](#).

Flavor and Consistency

Yogurt generally has a flavor familiar to most people. Different varieties of yogurt starter produce yogurt that varies from mild to tangy. The consistency of yogurt varies from a thin, pourable yogurt, such as [Piima](#), to a fairly thick, creamy yogurt such as [Bulgarian](#).

Milk Kefir is also tart, but it can have a touch of yeast flavor, due to the beneficial yeasts present in the culture. Milk kefir's flavor is more sour, and has been described as a cross between cultured buttermilk and yogurt. Most varieties of yogurt are also thicker than kefir, given the same length of fermentation time. While yogurt is almost always eaten with a spoon, milk kefir is usually consumed as a cultured dairy drink.

Versatility

Both yogurt and milk kefir may be made thicker by [draining whey](#) from the finished product.

Draining whey from yogurt results in a thick [Greek-style yogurt](#). Longer draining times yield [labneh or yogurt cheese](#). Milk kefir can be drained of whey to make a spoonable kefir, [soft spreadable cheese](#), [kefir cream cheese](#), or even [hard cheese](#). In addition to these different cheese products, both yogurt and milk kefir are quite versatile, and can be used in many recipes, from dips to baked goods.

Conclusion

Yogurt is a good source of probiotic bacteria, requiring weekly maintenance, depending on the culture chosen. It is generally a spoonable consistency and may be mild or tart in flavor. Yogurt may be used in a [variety of recipes](#). Milk kefir is a great source of probiotic bacteria and yeast, and requires daily maintenance, if using milk kefir grains. It is generally more sour in flavor and of a pourable consistency. Milk kefir may also be used in [many, many recipes](#).

Care & Feeding of Your New Kefir Grains:

If you find someone who will give you live kefir grains, rejoice! (They cost \$20 for 4 tbsp on-line, and often come dehydrated and needing weeks to become fully viable.) If you get a small amount (< teaspoonful), you should also start your kefir-making with a smaller quantity of milk (1/2 cup to a cup) for the first week or two...and work up from there as your grains multiply. (And...they WILL multiply!)

Need a break from making Kefir every 24 hours? Store them in milk in the fridge and change milk weekly or biweekly to keep them viable. Some claim they can also be frozen &/or dehydrated successfully.

How to Make Milk Kefir Video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v5FeQBqLAeTQ>