Biofortification and Fermentation of Agricultural Foods: Improving Nutritional Quality, Functional Properties, and Food Safety

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Abstract

Background Agricultural foods—cereals, legumes, vegetables, fruits, and oilseeds—remain primary sources of proteins, carbohydrates, dietary fiber, vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals for global populations. Micronutrient deficiencies (iron, zinc, vitamin A, folate) affect more than two billion people, compromising health and development, particularly in low- and middle-income regions. Conventional approaches often fail to deliver sustainable, affordable improvements in dietary quality.

Objective This review examines how agricultural biofortification increases nutrient density in crops and how microbial fermentation enhances nutrient bioavailability, reduces antinutritional factors, generates bioactive compounds, and improves food safety and functional properties. It evaluates the complementary benefits of integrating these strategies across major agricultural commodities and assesses sustainability implications.

Methods A systematic literature review of peer-reviewed articles, reviews, and authoritative reports from PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar was conducted. Search terms covered biofortification, fermentation, agricultural foods, micronutrient bioavailability, lactic acid bacteria, antinutritional factors, functional foods, and food safety. Inclusion prioritized studies from approximately 2019–2026 directly addressing agricultural commodities, nutrient enhancement, microbial mechanisms, and safety outcomes.

Results Biofortification via agronomic, conventional breeding, molecular, and microbial routes elevates iron, zinc, provitamin A, and other micronutrients in cereals, legumes, vegetables, and fruits. Fermentation with lactic acid bacteria, yeasts, and filamentous fungi degrades phytate, tannins, and enzyme inhibitors, improves protein digestibility, releases bound minerals and vitamins, and generates organic acids, bioactive peptides, and antioxidants. Combined approaches show synergistic gains in nutrient accessibility and functional quality while supporting pathogen suppression and shelf-life extension. Applications span cereals, pulses, plant proteins, and horticultural products, with potential contributions to circular bioeconomy goals.

Conclusion Integrating biofortification with controlled fermentation offers a science-based pathway to improve nutritional quality, functional properties, and safety of agricultural foods. Standardization of strains and processes, bioavailability assessment, scale-up, regulatory alignment, and consumer acceptance remain essential for broader impact. Advances in omics, precision fermentation, and digital systems can further optimize outcomes within sustainable food systems.

Keywords: Biofortification, Food Fermentation, Agricultural Foods, Micronutrient Enhancement, Lactic Acid Bacteria, Probiotics, Nutritional Quality, Functional Foods, Food Safety, Antinutritional Factors, Microbial Biotechnology, Sustainable Food Systems

1. Introduction

1.1. Nutritional Importance of Agricultural Foods

Cereals, pulses, legumes, vegetables, fruits, and oilseeds supply the majority of dietary energy, protein, fiber, vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals worldwide. These commodities underpin food security yet frequently exhibit suboptimal nutrient density relative to human requirements. Improving nutrient density while preserving accessibility and affordability is therefore a priority for nutrition-sensitive agriculture.

1.2. Micronutrient Deficiency and Food Security
Iron, zinc, vitamin A, calcium, and folate deficiencies remain widespread and contribute to anemia, impaired immunity, stunting, and elevated morbidity. Agricultural productivity gains have not always translated into nutritional security. Conventional supplementation and industrial fortification face distribution, cost, and coverage limitations, reinforcing the need for sustainable food-based strategies.

1.3. Concept of Biofortification
Biofortification increases the concentration or bioavailability of essential nutrients in edible plant parts through agronomic practices, conventional breeding, molecular and biotechnology-assisted methods, or microbial assistance. Compared with post-harvest fortification or supplementation, biofortification embeds nutrients in the crop itself, potentially reaching populations that rely on staple foods with limited access to diverse diets or fortified products. Limitations include genotype-by-environment interactions, yield–nutrition trade-offs, and the need for demonstrated bioavailability gains.

1.4. Role of Fermentation
Microbial fermentation improves nutrient bioavailability by degrading antinutritional factors, hydrolyzing proteins and complex carbohydrates, generating vitamins and bioactive metabolites, modifying sensory attributes, and enhancing preservation through acidification and antimicrobial compounds. These effects complement the nutrient enrichment achieved by biofortification.

1.5. Research Motivation
The integrated pathway—agricultural biofortification producing nutrient-enriched raw materials, followed by microbial fermentation that transforms the food matrix—addresses gaps in nutrient retention, strain-dependent performance, processing optimization, bioavailability quantification, product stability, industrial scalability, and consumer acceptance. This review synthesizes evidence along this continuum.

2. Related Work
2.1. Biofortification of Cereals
Breeding and agronomic programs have released iron- and zinc-dense rice, wheat, maize, millet, and sorghum varieties, alongside provitamin A maize and related crops. Marker-assisted and genomic approaches have accelerated trait introgression while seeking to maintain agronomic performance. [1-3]

2.2. Biofortification of Legumes and Pulses
Iron and zinc enrichment of lentils, chickpeas, beans, soybeans, and peas, together with improvements in protein quality and folate, has been achieved through conventional and molecular breeding. [4, 5]

2.3. Biofortification of Vegetables and Fruits
Carotenoid, mineral, and polyphenol enhancement has been demonstrated in sweet potato, cassava, and selected horticultural crops via breeding and agronomic interventions. [6]

2.4. Fermented Agricultural Foods
Lactic fermentation of cereals and legumes, yeast and fungal processes applied to plant substrates, and mixed-culture systems improve digestibility and reduce antinutrients. [7-9]

2.5. Combined Biofortification–Fermentation Approaches
Emerging studies indicate that fermentation can increase the accessibility of nutrients elevated by biofortification, although matrix-specific and strain-specific effects require further quantification. [10]

3. Biofortification Strategies for Agricultural Foods
3.1. Agronomic Biofortification
Soil and foliar application of micronutrient fertilizers, enriched irrigation, and optimized management can rapidly elevate tissue concentrations of zinc, iron, and selenium. Environmental considerations include fertilizer efficiency, residual effects, and accessibility for smallholders. [11]

3.2. Conventional Breeding
Selection of nutrient-dense germplasm and recurrent selection have produced stable varieties of cereals and legumes. Yield–nutrition trade-offs and genotype-by-environment interactions remain central challenges. [12]

3.3. Molecular and Biotechnology-Assisted Biofortification
Marker-assisted selection, genomic prediction, metabolic engineering, and gene-editing approaches enable targeted enrichment of minerals, provitamin A, and other nutrients while seeking to preserve agronomic traits. [13, 14]

3.4. Microbial and Soil-Based Biofortification
Plant-growth-promoting rhizobacteria, mycorrhizal fungi, and related inoculants mobilize soil nutrients and enhance plant uptake, offering a complementary route to genetic and agronomic methods. [15, 16]

3.5. Biofortification and Nutrient Bioavailability
Elevated concentration alone does not guarantee nutritional benefit. Chemical form, food-matrix interactions, and antinutritional factors modulate absorption. Bioavailability assessment is therefore essential. [17]

4. Fermentation Technologies and Microbial Mechanisms
4.1. Lactic Acid Bacteria
Lactobacillus and related genera acidify substrates, produce phytases that degrade phytate, hydrolyze proteins, generate organic acids and antimicrobial compounds, and form functional metabolites. [18, 20]

4.2. Yeast Fermentation
Saccharomyces and related yeasts transform carbohydrates and proteins, contribute to flavor development, and influence vitamin profiles in cereal and plant substrates. [21]

4.3. Fungal Fermentation
Aspergillus, Rhizopus, and other food-grade filamentous fungi secrete enzymes that hydrolyze proteins and phytate and generate bioactive compounds. [22]

4.4. Mixed-Culture Fermentation

Metabolic cooperation among lactic acid bacteria, yeasts, and fungi can improve process performance and nutritional outcomes relative to monocultures. [23]

4.5. Fermentation Process Parameters Temperature, pH, time, moisture, oxygen availability, starter concentration, and substrate composition critically determine microbial activity, metabolite profiles, and product quality. [24]

5. Materials and Methods

5.1. Literature Search Strategy

Databases searched included PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Core concepts encompassed biofortification, fermentation, agricultural foods, micronutrient bioavailability, functional foods, food safety, probiotics, nutritional enhancement, and antinutritional factors.

5.2. Inclusion Criteria

Peer-reviewed research articles, systematic reviews, and authoritative reviews published primarily between 2019 and 2026, with retention of foundational earlier studies, were included when they addressed agricultural commodities, biofortification, fermentation, nutrition, or food safety.

5.3. Exclusion Criteria

Studies unrelated to food systems, non-food fermentations lacking direct relevance, reports with insufficient methodological detail, and non-peer-reviewed sources were excluded.

5.4. Analytical Framework

Evidence was compared across commodity type, biofortification strategy, target nutrient, microbial species, fermentation conditions, nutritional and bioavailability outcomes, functional properties, safety indicators, industrial feasibility, and sustainability. Literature-derived findings were distinguished from interpretive synthesis.

6. Nutritional, Functional, and Food-Safety Outcomes

6.1. Micronutrient Enhancement

Fermentation can increase the solubility and estimated bioavailability of iron, zinc, calcium, magnesium, and selenium while supporting retention or synthesis of selected vitamins and carotenoids. [25]

6.2. Protein Quality

Proteolysis releases free amino acids and peptides, improving digestibility and generating bioactive peptides. [26]

6.3. Reduction of Antinutritional Factors

Microbial phytases, tannases, and related enzymes lower phytate, tannins, oxalates, and trypsin inhibitors, thereby reducing nutrient-binding capacity. [27, 28]

6.4. Antioxidant and Bioactive Compounds

Fermentation can elevate free phenolics, flavonoids, organic acids, exopolysaccharides, and bioactive peptides, contributing to antioxidant capacity. [29]

6.5. Food Safety

Acidification, organic-acid production, and antimicrobial metabolites suppress pathogens. Risks include mycotoxin formation under poorly controlled fungal processes and accumulation of biogenic amines; starter-culture authentication and process control are therefore required. [30]

7. Results and Comparative Evaluation

Synthesis of the literature indicates that biofortification alone elevates nutrient concentration; fermentation alone improves bioavailability and reduces antinutrients; and combined approaches can yield complementary gains in nutrient density and accessibility. Protein digestibility and antinutritional-factor reduction are generally enhanced by fermentation. Functional properties (texture, flavor, antioxidant activity) and safety indicators improve under controlled conditions. Process complexity and scalability increase with integrated systems, yet sustainability benefits arise from reduced waste and improved resource use when life-cycle impacts are favorable. Emerging trends include mineral-biofortified cereals subjected to lactic fermentation, fermented plant-protein ingredients, probiotic cereal and pulse products, and functional millet and sorghum foods.

Table 1: Major Biofortification Strategies and Target Nutrients in Agricultural Foods

Biofortification strategy	Agricultural food	Target nutrient	Mechanism	Major advantages	Key limitations
Agronomic	Cereals, legumes	Zn, Fe, Se	Soil/foliar fertilizer application	Rapid response, flexible	Recurrent cost, environmental load
Conventional breeding	Rice, wheat, beans	Fe, Zn, provitamin A	Selection of dense genotypes	Stable trait, low recurring cost	Slow, yield trade-offs
Molecular/biotech	Maize, rice, cassava	Provitamin A, Fe, Zn	Metabolic engineering, gene editing	Precision, multi-trait potential	Regulatory, acceptance
Microbial/soil	Cereals, pulses	Fe, Zn, other minerals	PGPR, mycorrhizae, nutrient mobilization	Sustainable, soil-health co-benefits	Inoculant stability, field variability

Table 2: Effects of Fermentation on Nutritional and Functional Characteristics of Biofortified Agricultural Foods

Food category	Representative microorganism	Major fermentation mechanism	Nutritional effect	Antinutritional factor affected	Functional outcome
Cereals	Lactobacillus spp.	Phytase, acidification	↑ mineral solubility	Phytate	Improved digestibility, flavor
Legumes	Lactiplantibacillus plantarum	Proteolysis, phytase	↑ protein digestibility	Phytate, tannins	Reduced off-flavors, bioactive peptides
Vegetables	LAB mixed cultures	Organic-acid production	Variable vitamin profiles	Limited	Pathogen suppression, shelf life
Fruits	Yeast/LAB	Metabolite formation	Bioactive enrichment	Variable	Sensory improvement
Plant proteins	Fungi/LAB	Enzyme hydrolysis	↑ amino-acid availability	Enzyme inhibitors	Textural and functional modification

Table 3: Comparative Evaluation of Biofortification, Fermentation, and Integrated Biofortification–Fermentation Approaches

Parameter	Biofortification alone	Fermentation alone	Integrated approach	Major limitations
Nutrient concentration	High	Moderate	High	Stability during processing
Nutrient bioavailability	Variable	Improved	Further improved	Matrix-dependent
Protein digestibility	Limited change	Improved	Improved	Strain specificity
Antinutritional factor reduction	Limited	Strong	Strong	Incomplete degradation possible
Food safety	Neutral	Generally improved	Improved under control	Mycotoxin/biogenic-amine risk
Process complexity	Low–moderate	Moderate	Higher	Scale-up, standardization
Scalability	High (once released)	Moderate–high	Moderate	Cost, infrastructure
Sustainability	Potentially favorable	Favorable if low-input	Context-dependent	Requires life-cycle assessment

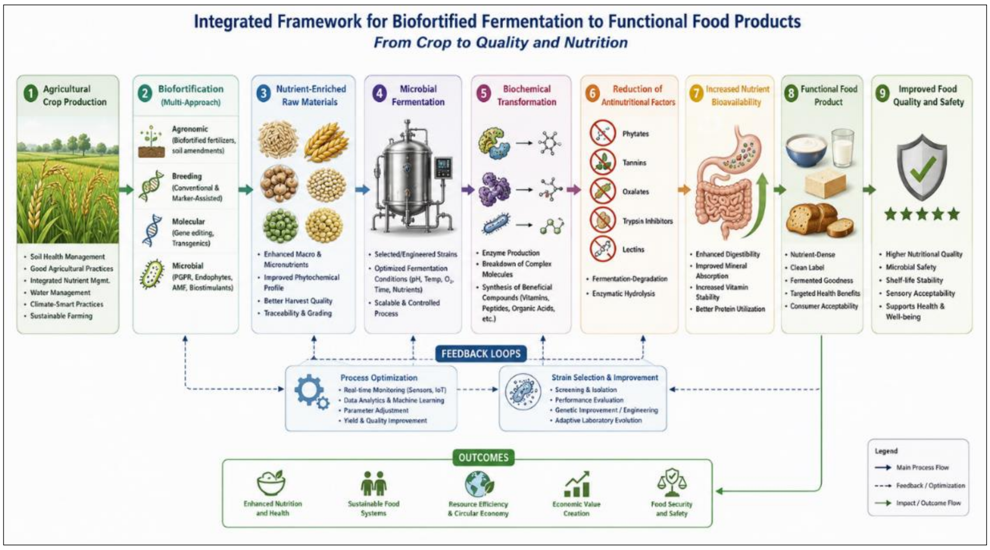

Fig 1: Integrated Biofortification–Fermentation Pathway for Nutritional Enhancement of Agricultural Foods

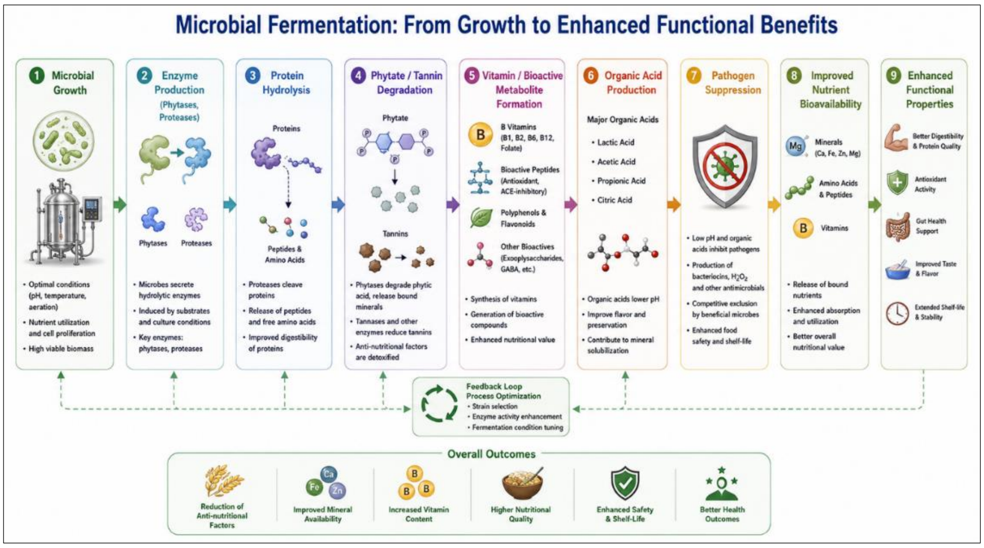

Fig 2: Microbial and Biochemical Mechanisms Linking Fermentation With Nutritional Enhancement and Food Safety

8. Discussion

8.1. Advantages of Integrated Approaches

Biofortification raises nutrient density; fermentation improves accessibility by matrix modification and antinutrient reduction. Together they address both quantity and quality of nutrients while supporting functional and safety attributes.

8.2. Microbial and Nutritional Interactions

Enzymatic degradation, organic-acid production, mineral solubilization, and protein hydrolysis constitute the principal mechanisms linking microbial activity to nutritional outcomes.

8.3. Food Matrix Effects

Composition, processing history, fermentation conditions, storage, and chemical form of nutrients jointly determine final bioavailability.

8.4. Industrial Feasibility

Standardized starter cultures, process control, quality assurance, and regulatory compliance are prerequisites for consistent industrial application. Cost and infrastructure remain constraints in many settings.

8.5. Sustainability

Resource requirements, energy and water use, waste reduction, and circular-bioeconomy potential must be evaluated through life-cycle assessment; automatic superiority cannot be assumed.

9. Challenges and Future Research Directions

Challenges include varietal and environmental variation in nutrient concentration, nutrient stability during processing, strain- and batch-dependent fermentation performance, limited long-term retention data, matrix-specific bioavailability differences, food-safety risks (mycotoxins, biogenic amines), regulatory requirements, consumer acceptance, and cost-effective scale-up.

9.1. Omics Technologies

Genomics, metagenomics, transcriptomics, proteomics, and metabolomics enable precise characterization of microbial communities and metabolic pathways.

9.2. Precision Fermentation

Controlled microbial systems can be optimized for specific nutritional and functional targets.

9.3. Artificial Intelligence

Machine-learning approaches support strain selection, process optimization, nutrient prediction, and predictive safety models.

9.4 Digital Fermentation Systems

Integration of sensors, IoT, AI/ML, digital twins, and automated bioreactors offers real-time control.

9.5. Future Integrated Food Systems

A coherent framework linking biofortified agriculture, nutrient-dense raw materials, precision fermentation, omics-based characterization, AI-assisted optimization, functional-food production, quality and safety prediction, and sustainable systems can guide future development.

10. Conclusion

Biofortification elevates the nutrient density of agricultural foods, while controlled microbial fermentation improves bioavailability, reduces antinutritional factors, enhances functional compounds, and supports food safety and preservation. Combining these approaches yields complementary benefits for nutritional quality and product functionality. Industrial implementation requires standardization, robust safety management, scalable processes, cost control, and regulatory clarity. Omics tools, precision fermentation, artificial intelligence, IoT, and automated systems offer pathways to optimize outcomes within sustainable food systems. Continued interdisciplinary research is essential to translate these scientific advances into measurable nutritional and food-system benefits.

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