

Strange Brew

It's alive! Uncovering the many mysteries of kombucha tea, the tart but intriguing bioactive tonic with a growing fan base.

+ BY HANNAH WALLACE PHOTOGRAPHS BY RAYMOND HOM

A SOUR CONCOCTION WITH live cultures floating on top sounds like something you'd throw away if you found it under your sink. And yet the tart, fizzy, fermented tea called kombucha is both an ancient tonic and the latest health craze. Kombucha, made from either black, white, or green tea, sugar, and a "symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast" (SCOBY), is having a renaissance. According to Gary Hemphill, managing director at Beverage Marketing Corporation, U.S. sales of bottled kombucha doubled from 2007 to 2008, to roughly \$70 million (wholesale). Scan the beverage aisle at your local grocery store and you'll be surprised to find a range of brands peddling the brew: GT's Kombucha, Red Bull's Carpe Diem, Celestial Seasonings (out in April), and Honest Tea, as well as indie labels like Kombucha Brooklyn and Kombucha Wonder Drink. Some mad-scientist



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types are taking a more grassroots approach by reviving the hippie practice of home-brewing.

MAGIC POTION?

Kombucha has a long history, starting in second-century China, where it's thought to have first been made. It reportedly then traveled across Asia, Eastern Europe, and Russia, where it's still an everyday beverage called *chayni grib* ("tea mushroom").

The tonic has many converts, like Christine Petrozzo, 24, who's been drinking kombucha for three years. "It's amazing," she says. "When I drink it, I feel relaxed and energized at the same time." As she began regularly consuming the tea, she noticed other benefits: improved digestion and clearer skin. Before he cofounded Kombucha Brooklyn, Eric Childs, 24, drank the tea to cope with his high-stress job at a Manhattan art gallery. "Heartburn had been a daily thing for me," Childs says. "I kept Pepeto-Bismol in my bag." One day, his boss brought a bottle of kombucha to work; Childs gave it a try. "All of a sudden I started feeling better,"

he says. "I stopped getting heartburn. My acne went away, and I was happier."

While lab studies have shown that kombucha contains a blend of probiotics, B vitamins, enzymes, and various organic acids, very little research has been done on the drink's benefits. Gastrointestinal issues are the problem that kombucha seems to help with the most, possibly due to the healthy bacteria created by the fermentation process, which support immune function and digestion, notes Denver-based naturopathic doctor Courtney Jackson. She adds that B vitamins give kombucha a big part of its functional punch. "B vitamins are intimately involved in metabolism, mood, the liver's detoxification pathways, skin and hair structure, and energy production."

Jennifer Adler, a certified nutritionist and professor of nutrition at Bastyr University in Seattle, is a fan of all kinds of fermented foods (such as yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, and kimchi) precisely because of their high levels of probiotics, live enzymes, and B vitamins. She encourages her patients

who suffer from digestive issues, heartburn, and acid reflux to try one cup of kombucha per day with meals. For those who get a mid-day energy slump, Adler says, kombucha may help. "B vitamins give people a bit of pep, and the healthy bacteria keep sugar cravings down," she explains.

THE DAILY DOSAGE

Check with your doctor before you start chugging the stuff, and keep in mind that kombucha advocates advise beginning with six to eight ounces a day, then seeing how you feel. It is relatively acidic, so consuming too much can, ironically, *cause* heartburn and could, for some, have a laxative effect. Twelve ounces also contains a trace amount of alcohol, caffeine (20 to 24 mg, compared to up to 160 mg in coffee), and about 4 grams of sugar. Naturopathic doctor Garrett Wdowin, founder of an integrative health center in Arizona, personally finds kombucha to be a bit sour, but doesn't discourage his patients from giving it a shot. "The increased intake of vitamins is hard to ever see as a bad thing."

Grow Your Own

We had Rick Miller from Kombucha Brooklyn into our offices to mix up a batch and explain how you get from tea to bubbly beverage. For detailed instructions and safety information (home-brewing safety is extremely important), log on to wholeliving.com/kombucha.



Begin The components include a SCOBY, tea, cane sugar, and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of already brewed kombucha, plus sterilized equipment. Order a starter kit at kombuchabrooklyn.com.



Mix it up Once the tea is brewed, the sugar is dissolved in it and cooled. The brewed kombucha and SCOBY are added, and the concoction is placed in a dark, warm environment.



Let it brew For seven to 14 days, the SCOBY feeds on the sugar and caffeine, producing acids as it ferments. It's then bottled and sits for another week or two, creating the bubbles.

Kombucha to Go

Most bottled versions are 100 percent kombucha or are flavored with fruit.



GT'S KOMBUCHA
\$3.50;
synergydrinks.com

HIGH COUNTRY
\$3.60;
hckombu.com



CARPE DIEM
\$2;
carpediem.com