

Kombucha tea: Healthy or hype?

100-year old fermented tea beverage may improve health, vitality

By Gretel Hakanson

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Rising in popularity, Kombucha (pronounced com-BOOCH-a or com-BOOK-a) is a tart, sometimes fizzy, tea-like beverage with loads of health-promoting claims. Kombucha is a fermented drink, brewed from green or black tea, sugar and a starter culture.

Legend has it that the Korean physician Kombu introduced the medicinal beverage to Japan in 414 A.D. to treat the emperor Inkyo. Others say the earliest recorded details can be traced to Russia in the 19th century.

Because it is a cultured beverage, raw, unpasteurized kombucha contains live bacteria and yeast, similar to yogurt. Much of the health claims are anecdotal, but the trendy tea has been promoted for enhanced digestion, increased energy and vitality, improved immune functioning, liver detoxification, and cancer prevention.

Until the introduction of commercial products in the past few years, kombucha drinkers historically brewed their own. Until June of this year, various brands and flavors of bottled kombucha were available at natural foods stores. Kombucha sales exceeded \$150 million in the U.S. last year, according to industry analysts.

Vanishing Act

Early this summer, bottles of raw, unpasteurized kombucha were pulled from the shelves of grocery retailers, including Whole Foods Markets. Regulators and retailers questioned whether it should be regulated as an alcoholic drink because some varieties were shown to contain more than 0.5 percent alcohol – the legal limit for a drink not considered to be alcoholic.

The sudden scarcity led to an increased interest in home brewing of the cultured tea. In fact, Blake Collins, manager at Brew Your Own Brew in Tucson, says a lot of people have come to his store asking about it since it was pulled from the shelves. While his shop doesn't sell the starters, they do sell other supplies used in kombucha brewing.

"I think it's a great idea [to make it yourself]. It's so expensive to buy it in the store. It's so much cheaper to make it on your own and you can control what's in it," says Collins.

The U.S. government is still testing and reviewing dozens of kombucha varieties to determine whether they should be taxed and distributed as alcoholic spirits. Meanwhile, some brands have figured out how to return their products to the shelves. Pasteurized versions – where the yeast and bacteria are heated, much like milk – are still for sale because the process kills the yeast, which makes the alcohol. Other commercial brewers have purchased equipment to remove alcohol.



PHOTO: Flickr

Two batches of kombucha tea, fermenting a colony of SCOBYS.

Brew Your Own

Usually, brewing kombucha begins with a live colony of bacteria and yeast called a SCOBY (symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast). Kombucha is also known as the Manchurian Mushroom, a misnomer because no mushroom species are involved. Kombucha is actually a living culture of beneficial microorganisms. Resembling a gelatinous pancake, the SCOBY is then added to black or green tea and the whole mixture is allowed to ferment for a week or more.

The SCOBY, often called "the mother," is a living, growing entity. Rather than create spores, it typically creates a new culture (a "baby") with every batch.

During the fermentation process, the SCOBY feeds off of the sugar and tea solution. The resulting tangy drink is the waste product of the SCOBY's digestion process. Upon completion, the resulting cider-like brew contains very little sugar. Studies of the nutritional makeup of the beverage revealed vitamins C and B along with viable probiotics, active enzymes, organic acids, amino acids, antioxidants and polyphenols.

Probiotics are friendly microbes that play an important role in digestive and immune systems. Active enzymes are specialized proteins that are also powerful biochemical catalysts; they speed burning or building reactions in the body according to need. Polyphenols are powerful antioxidants that fight off the free radicals that stress the body and compromise health.

Karl VanArsdale of the Vibrant Health Institute in Tucson recommends kombucha to his all of his patients because of its beneficial microorganisms. "It's a broad spectrum probiotic that touches on every disease state for some kind of benefit," he says.

VanArsdale believes the tea creates needed chemistry changes inside the body by attacking and dissolving vicious microbes, fungus, bacteria and viruses. To start, VanArsdale recommends drinking a

quarter- to a half-cup a day along with a probiotic tablet, which complements the probiotics in the kombucha.

"We're seeing consistent energy increases and elimination of fungus in our patients," said VanArsdale. "People with insomnia, IBS, depression, diabetes, chronic fatigue syndrome and lupus almost always have a fungus and a bacteria that's out of control and chronically, in America people aren't tested for fungus and bacteria."

VanArsdale said his patients love the fla-

vor and enjoy the process brewing the tea beverage. He believes that everyone can benefit from kombucha. Consuming it regularly will "continue to build probiotics levels and keep them established inside the gut tissues. Because they can stay planted in the gut, they can continue to ward off coming infections or even airborne infections," VanArsdale said.

Brewing your own kombucha is as easy as brewing a big batch of tea. The trickiest aspect may be finding a starter culture (a SCOBY). Starters can be purchased from kombucha companies online, sometimes they're posted on CraigList, and the Tucson Fermented Food Enthusiasts, a Facebook group, aims to encourage the sharing of starters and information at no cost.

Author: Gretel Hakanson is a local freelance writer.

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