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Crazy for Kombucha

The drink's enthusiasts are brewing their own

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The bottles of kombucha that Terri Tomac brews begin in a large jar like the one at right.



Move over, hobby beer brewers. There's another beverage gaining ground in Southwest Michigan's home brewing circles: kombucha.

Kombucha, pronounced "kom-BOO-chaa," combines the fruity flavor of pop with the fizz of beer. It is a fermented drink, like beer and wine, and leaves a similar tangy feeling on the tongue.

"My husband and I have about one bottle a day," says Terri Tomac of Bloomingdale, who has been home-brewing kombucha for about a year and a half. "It's real easy to chug down a bottle."

As a fermented beverage, kombucha has some alcohol in it, but, according to getkombucha.com, an information website for kombucha, the alcohol content of the beverage is generally less than 1 percent by volume (about the same as a non-alcoholic beer). According to the U.S. Department of Treasury's Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, kombucha must contain less than 0.5 percent alcohol by volume to be marketed and sold as a non-alcoholic beverage.

Fans of the drink swear it has improved their health, offering increased energy levels and “detoxification.” But there’s been little formal research on kombucha, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has not credited kombucha with any medical benefits.

The beverage combines steeped green or black tea and sugar with a soft, mushroom-like substance called a SCOBY, short for “symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast.” A SCOBY is also known as a “mother” or “mushroom.” The SCOBY floats in the tea for a week to a month, and a second SCOBY forms in the container. Once the SCOBYs are removed, fruit such as berries or citrus slices or even juice from concentrate can be mixed in to flavor the drink. The concoction then needs to sit somewhere without direct sunlight and at room temperature. After a few more weeks of fermenting, it’s ready.

“You can make it for less than a dollar a bottle, depending on the fruit you use,” Tomac says.

A SCOBY can be reused, much like sourdough bread starter, and each time a batch of kombucha is brewed, a new SCOBY is created. Brewers will often share their SCOBYs, which are sometimes called “kombucha babies,” with friends looking to begin brewing their own kombucha. SCOBYs have even appeared on Craigslist.

If you aren’t quite ready to turn your spare room into a small-scale kombucha brewery, or just want to sample the beverage for yourself, several brands of kombucha are available at local stores, including Sawall Health Foods and the People’s Food Co-Op. Popular brands include GT’s, which is made in California, and Kombucha Wonder Drink, produced in Portland, Oregon. Sawall Manager Ken Kulifay says customers regularly buy a dozen or more bottles at a time.

Sawall also carries a brand of kombucha made a little closer to home: Bloom Ferments, produced in Grand Rapids. It comes in two flavors, ginger and lavender-hibiscus, although a limited-edition blood-orange flavor was brewed for a week in June.

Emily Helmus, owner of Bloom Ferments, first tried kombucha in 2011, and by 2013 she was selling enough of her home-brewed drink to make brewing her full-time job. Currently, Bloom Ferments is available in a few stores in West Michigan, and Helmus says she has a waiting list of stores in the Detroit area and along the lakeshore that want to carry her product.

“I cannot keep up with demand,” Helmus says. “My main goal is to get it into low-income areas. I want it to be as accessible as possible.”

Helmus orders her supplies online and uses 55-gallon plastic tubs to brew the tea and create SCOBYs. Though some kombucha brewers say chemicals in plastic can leach into the liquid, Helmus says she’s seen no negative repercussions from using the tubs.

Like many kombucha enthusiasts, Tomac discovered kombucha after she and her husband started looking for ways to improve their health after suffering from a number of chronic illnesses. Research led her to a diet without processed foods and to the concept of cleansing, or washing unhealthy chemicals from the body with simple foods like brown rice, water and kombucha. Kombucha soon

became one of her favorite beverages.

“People use it to wean themselves off pop,” she says. “It’s not as sweet, but it’s fizzy and fruity.”

Helmus, on the other hand, says she grew up eating healthy foods and wanted to keep up that tradition with her own family. Before Bloom Ferments became a business, she traded bottles of kombucha for artwork, locally raised eggs or anything else a friend or neighbor wanted to trade.

Kombucha is a probiotic, meaning it contains live yeasts and bacteria, which proponents of the drink say helps with digestion. The FDA hasn’t created a definition for the term “probiotic” or produced official studies on the possible benefits of kombucha. Regardless, Helmus says she has felt the health benefits from drinking kombucha.

“It can help your gut balance out,” she claims. “Even my kids are calmer.”

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Kombucha

home brewers

Terri Tomac

SCOBY

symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast

kombucha mother

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kombucha babies

GT’s

Kombucha Wonder Drink

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