

Minding Your Body

A Dose of Culture

A look at the Kombucha craze ■ By Amanda Burhop

You may have seen them in your local

grocer's aisle: tall glass bottles filled with a colorful liquid. But it's not the liquid that attracts you; it's the mysterious gunk lingering at the bottom of the bottle. You check the seal; it's not broken, so it can't be backwash. You try shaking it up; maybe it just needs to be mixed. But it's no good; something is still in there, mocking you as it swims by.

This isn't just any mysterious gunk. These floaties are Kombucha cultures.

According to the American Cancer Society website, Kombucha tea originated in East Asia and was introduced in Germany at the turn of the century. Its origins and popularity can also be traced through Russia and the Western states.

Currently Kombucha is gaining media attention because of claims by producers and users that Kombucha beverages boost the body's immune system and can treat everything from arthritis to gout.

Simply, a Kombucha culture, according to Kombucha.org, is a symbiotic colony of yeast and the good kind of bacteria that, when allowed to ferment (yes, there is a small trace of alcohol, but it's less than one percent), produces active enzymes and antibiotics.

The Kombucha culture, which is generally mixed with black tea and sugar, is considered a "living, growing entity," according to the website of GT's Kombucha (www.gtskombucha.com). Because of this, the culture regenerates and creates new cultures with every batch. In fact, it's an indication that the product is still living and active.

GT's Kombucha claims, "Kombucha is

not a supplement drug or medicine... it is simply a super healthy food that helps the body to find (or regain) its natural balance in the body, which promotes overall well-being." While many Kombucha products make this claim, the Food and Drug Administration is skeptical of its healing properties.

The FDA states: "The unconventional nature of the process used to make Kombucha has led to questions as to whether the product could become contaminated with potentially harmful microorganisms, such as mild *Aspergillus*." However, these same studies have found no evidence of any contamination, but the FDA remains unconvinced. So until further research is done, drink in moderation.

How you can get it: These three products were found at Market of Choice and Cappella, but they can be found at most natural food stores.

Synergy or GT's Kombucha: This cold beverage is generous in size and flavor. However, while there are varieties of flavors, in my experience most of them taste the same. Divine grape is a safe choice as it's slightly sweeter than the others. First timers: Don't take a big gulp of the drink! Your taste buds will freak out. Synergy is an acquired

taste that tends to turn people off at first. Due to the fermentation process, the drink tastes acidic and like vinegar. And be aware that the product is carbonated, so an explosion of tiny bubbles sometimes occurs (trust me: They occurred all over my shirt once). If you can get past the initial funky flavor, Synergy becomes tastier with every sip.

Kombucha Wonder Drink: This way tasty drink comes in little 8.5 oz bottles with flavors like Asian pear ginger and jasmine Niagara grape. The Wonder Drink is a "Sparkling Himalayan Tonic" combined with natural flavors and tea. The result is a cider-like, sweet drink with a hint of champagne flavor, a yummy initiator for the Kombucha newbie.

Green Tea Kombucha: Yogi Tea offers a warmer way to get Kombucha. The benefit to Yogi's product is that it doesn't contain refined sugar or black tea. Instead it uses lemongrass, spearmint leaf and "Kombucha-Pure Extract." The result is a taste that's more bubblegum flavor than green tea. The sweet flavor, while tasty, isn't a stand-in for green tea or a cold Kombucha drink. It's in a league of its own. Plus, Yogi comes from a Eugene company, keeping your money local.

Make your own: Robin Leah started making her own Kombucha over a year ago once she realized how much money she was spending on it. Leah's ingredi-

ents include a Kombucha culture, sugar, tea and, like many recipes, a hefty dose of patience while it ferments. Kombuchacultures.com has a step-by-step recipe with photos included. Briefly, it involves boiling water and adding sugar and tea. Once the mixture is cooled, a Kombucha culture is added and allowed to ferment. All that's left is to strain and drink.

Like many looking for alternative ways to keep their body healthy, Leah has found a friend in Kombucha. "What I know for sure is that my body seems to have a daily craving for it and that I have not been sick once this cold season, although many people around me have," Leah says. ■



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