

HAWAII buzzing about kombucha



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HAWAII IS A HOT SPOT FOR THIS FIZZY, FERMENTED TEA. BY ILIMA LOOMIS

Belly up to the bar at Maui Kombucha in Haiku and one of the cafe's friendly "booch-tenders" will proffer a shot-glass sampler of the three flavors on tap that day. With a rotating roster of mouth-puckering flavors such as ginger/lime, blueberry fusion and lilikoi (passion fruit), this isn't your hippie mom's kombucha.

Fizzy, funky and loaded with gut-friendly probiotics, kombucha is having a moment. Based on an ancient Chinese beverage made from fermented tea, kombucha has had a small but devoted following in the alternative-health community for decades. But in recent years, it's gone mainstream. Today, you can find dozens of bottled brands and flavors on grocery store shelves. And hyperlocal kombucha makers have sprung up across the country in a parallel to beer's microbrewery movement.

"BOOCH" RISING

If kombucha is growing in popularity, Hawaii has been at the forefront of the trend. Today you can find kombucha breweries on every major island, and locally made kombucha is served on tap at many bars, restaurants and cafes.

Perhaps no one has done more to put "booch" on the map in Hawaii than Chris Burke. When he opened Maui Kombucha in 2008, Burke knew of only one other kombucha bar in the country. Now he regularly gets calls from brewers around the U.S. wanting advice on setting up their own establishments. "They are starting to pop up," he says.

Long interested in health and nutrition, Burke had home-brewed kombucha in the 1980s. But he was working as a jewelry artist on Maui in the early 2000s when he noticed a bottle from a national kombucha brand in a local health-food store and decided to give it a try. "I thought, 'I can do way better than this,'" he says. He began brewing kombucha at home and sharing it with friends after yoga class. "Pretty soon, I had people calling me, and I didn't know where they got my number."

Burke liked that the drink was low in sugar, contained vitamin B and other nutrients, and packed a dose of beneficial bacteria. He felt and enjoyed kombucha's reputed nonalcoholic buzz, and he found the taste light and refreshing. "It's slightly sweet, slightly tangy, there's a natural effervescence," he says.

When he moved his operation to a commercial kitchen in 2005, he was the first commercial kombucha brewer in the state. No longer. Today there are at least five local kombucha makers on Maui alone, with more on the Big Island, Kauai and Oahu. But brewers agree: kombucha still hasn't reached its peak.

"Definitely, there's more room to grow," says Jason Blair, owner of Kona Kombucha in Papa'aloa on Big Island. Especially in health-conscious Hawaii, he sees an increasing demand for alternatives to sodas and sugary drinks. "People are looking for a beverage that tastes good and is refreshing and healthy."

PLAYING CATCH-UP

Urban, bustling Honolulu may be a beat behind hippie outposts such as Maui and the Big Island on the kombucha trend, but it's quickly catching up, says Shannon Yarber, co-owner with husband David of Oahu-based SKY Kombucha. "I feel like there's a large market out there that's still untapped."

Customers span a cross section of the community from the group she euphemistically calls "early adopters" (aging hippies and health-food enthusiasts who've long drunk kombucha as a tonic) to hipsters on the lookout for anything crafty to local to women in their 20s and 30s. "You'll find a lot of health-conscious moms drinking it," Yarber says.

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SKY Kombucha starts with a blend of green and black tea sweetened with organic cane sugar. The Yarbers grow their own culture, or SCOBY (symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast), to start the fermentation process. “I explain it to people as a Southern sweet tea that’s been fermented for three weeks,” Yarber says. “Before it turns into vinegar, you hit that sweet spot.”

Those put off by kombucha’s reputation as stinky and scummy (a description likely earned by inexperienced and inexact home brewers in the ’60s and ’70s) may be pleasantly surprised by the first sip. Depending on the brewer’s preferences, kombucha can run the spectrum from delicately sweet to slightly tangy, often with a yeasty, almost beer-like, undertone. And it’s naturally sparkling.

BLENDING IN LOCAL FLAVOR

Many brewers build on that base by adding flavors, and Hawaii brewers in particular emphasize local, seasonal ingredients. Quinn Yeamans, owner of Hawaii Kombucha in Kealahou, Kona, founded a nonprofit organization that had volunteers collect unpicked fruit and produce from homes on the Big Island to share among themselves and distribute to charity. The volunteers often drank home-brewed kombucha after picking, and one day, a friend passed out bottles flavored with surinam cherries that they had collected the week before. “Everyone went nuts over it,” Yeamans says.

Funding for the project eventually ran out, and Yeamans was troubled thinking of the fruit now going to waste. He made a business plan for a kombucha brewery, found an investor and put \$10,000 on a credit card to buy fermenting tanks. He started by brewing 50 gallons, and got friends at a local health-food store to put it on tap. “We sold out that first week,” he says.

Today, Yeamans brews around 900 gallons per week, and buys fruit from some of the same properties and farms where he used to collect produce as a volunteer. Flavors reflect whatever’s local and available. Top-sellers range from ginger and citrus breeze (a mix that might include Tahitian lime, tangelo, tangerine, oranges, lemons or other citrus, depending on what’s in season) to jaboticaba, a grape-like “superfruit” native to Brazil that he buys from a local farmer when it’s in season twice a year.

Burke, too, isn’t afraid to try exotic ingredients, and especially loves coming up with unusual blends. “I am just nuts about flavors,” he says. “I can taste something and go, ‘That’s cardamom. That’s ginger.’ I like things to have layers and levels.”

ABOVE: CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
1) A rainbow of flavors bottled by SKY Kombucha on Oahu. 2) Draught SKY Kombucha’s reusable 5-gallon kegs provide a “zero-waste” model of beverage consumption. 3) Chris Burke was the first commercial kombucha brewer in the state. 4) At Maui Kombucha, fruits, herbs and flowers are distilled to create the hydrosols incorporated into the brews.

He distills fruits, herbs and flowers to create the hydrosols he incorporates into his brews. “You can do crazy things like peach and tarragon, rosemary and tangerine,” he says. Popular mixes include MOG (mango/orange/guava), lilikoi/lemon and blueberry fusion—a concoction of blueberry, Meyer lemon and ginger that was one of his first combinations.

Burke is also an amateur herbalist who loves reading about plants’ healing properties and will often experiment with ingredients based on their reputed effects. For one recent blend, he combined damiana leaf, a traditional aphrodisiac (“It’s legal,” he notes), with cacao and passion fruit flower, which is said to lift depression. “I thought, ‘OK, these are all real powerful mood-enhancers, they’re used in love potions. Let’s see how they combine flavor-wise,’” he says. “It’s really good. You can taste all of them at different points, and they blend and merge.”

BELOW THE LIMIT

Maui Kombucha’s far-out flavors are one reason the bar, which also offers a raw vegan menu, has become a quirky, eclectic scene on Maui’s lush North Shore, says devotee Katie McMillan, who met her boyfriend there. “I call it the hippie Cheers. I think there are a lot of people who don’t want to drink straight-up alcohol but who still crave that social atmosphere of a bar—especially here, where people are super health-conscious.”

But while he may call his establishment a bar, like other kombucha brewers, Burke is careful to keep his alcohol levels down. While it’s a natural byproduct of the fermentation process, nobody wants a boozy kombucha—least of all the federal government. Regulators require kombucha brewers to keep their product under 0.5% alcohol.

Burke acknowledges that, early on, Maui Kombucha struggled to keep its product under the limit. But the company has since purchased a gas chromatograph to measure alcohol content, and tests its product at least twice a month in addition to sending samples for lab testing once a quarter. Those results are provided to regulators, as well as some clients, such as Whole Foods. The amount of sugar, type of starter used, temperature and brewing time are just some of the factors that can tweak alcohol content, Burke notes. “It was a challenge for a while, but we figured it out.”

Yarber says her company is also careful about its recipe and brewing process to ensure alcohol content stays low—SKY Kombucha averages around 0.13% alcohol in lab testing, she says. “As a mother, I’m OK with my kids drinking my kombucha.”

But she agrees that getting the right balance can be tricky. Proper handling of the product, particularly keeping it cold, is critical to prevent it from continuing to ferment as it sits. “I feel it can be way too easy for kombucha to develop an alcohol content above (the limit),” she says.

WHAT’S NEXT?

“I think kombucha cocktails could be the next big thing,” Yarber says. Doctored with other ingredients, kombucha can offer a nonalcoholic yet adult-tasting beverage for people who want a mellow night out, she adds.

Others are putting the booze back into “booch” and creating harder concoctions. Monkeypod Kitchen in Wailea, Maui, added a julep-inspired kombucha drink to its menu two years ago, says beverage director Jason Vendrell. Bartenders muddle fresh strawberries with mint and honey, add bourbon and ice, and top with Tahitian lime kombucha. “It just gives it a little bit of acidity,” Vendrell says.

The restaurant also offers two selections of kombucha on its drinks menu, and he says it’s especially popular at lunch and with staff. “It’s literally on tap. With kombucha, you have this healthy drink that you can also make fun with booze.” ■



TOP TO BOTTOM: David Yarber, co-owner of SKY Kombucha, samples strawberry kombucha, simply made with kombucha and organic strawberries. Triple-filtered water pours into a SCOBY (symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast), beginning the brewing cycle at SKY Kombucha.

PHOTO CREDITS Opposite, clockwise from left: 1) & 2) Shannon Yarber 3) & 4) Maui Kombucha; above, top to bottom: Shannon Yarber

ILIMA LOOMIS IS A FREELANCE WRITER WHO HAS COVERED HAWAII FOR MORE THAN 15 YEARS. SHE LIVES ON MAUI.