



Kombucha Cool

Once a hippie drink brewed in West Coast basements, the fermented tea beverage has moved to the mainstream. Area makers can't keep up with demand.



BRAD AND KRISTI-JO PROCAK open the door to their business, a low-slung house on a busy street in Floyd. Then they enter a sunlit room with stark white walls. "This is our sacred space," says Brad, with dramatic flourish. The air is warm and moist, thick with a fruity smell. Eighteen oak barrels cover the worn hardwood floor. A quote from Guatama Buddha keeps watch over a cluster of two dozen kegs. A hum, set to 528 Hz, is intended to infuse the place with positive energy.



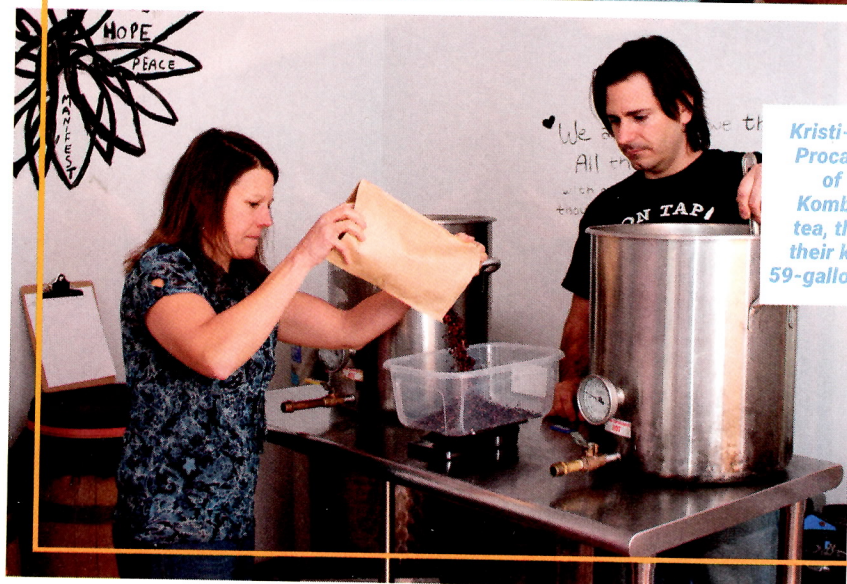
The Procaks are brewing kombucha, a fermented tea drink that has rocked the beverage industry over the last several years. And this is their fermenting room.

For 30 days, a variety of tea blends, sugar, water and something called SCOBY (Symbiotic Culture Of Bacteria and Yeast, think starter, as in sourdough bread) mixes and bubbles and grows. The brew is then infused with herbs, fruit, grains or roots and poured into kegs. Then the Procaks drive their Tha Best Kombucha to stores, restaurants and farmers markets as far afield as Asheville, Charlotte, Lynchburg and Harrisonburg.

There, it's drunk by adults and kids, for its health benefits and its flavor, for its naturally occurring carbonation and for its cool.

"It's bubbly, it tastes good, it energizes you and heals your gut flora," says Kristi-Jo. "You can feel the difference from drinking it."

Hailed as an elixir of health in alternative medicine circles for decades, kombucha has, in the past five years, moved to the mainstream. Kombucha sales jumped 41 percent in 2016 alone, according to the Beverage Marketing Corporation, an industry trade group. The number of commercial kombucha makers in the U.S. has increased some 800 percent over the past decade, says Jamie Danek, CEO of Bend, Oregon-based Humm Kombucha and a board member of Kombucha Brewers International.

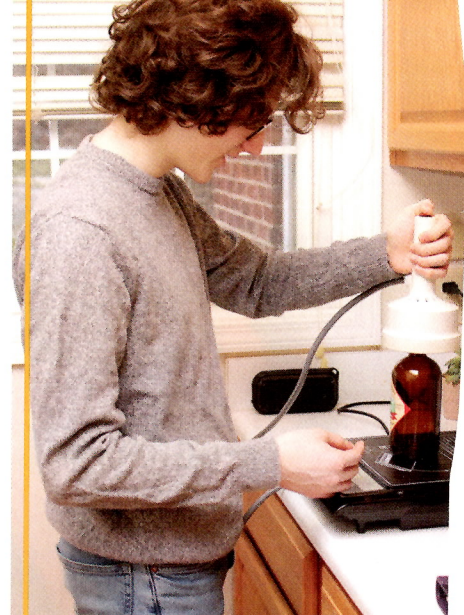


Kristi-Jo and Brad Procak, founders of Tha Best Kombucha, brew tea, then ferment their kombucha in 59-gallon oak barrels.





HUMM KOMBUCHA



Kombucha's rise is similar to that of craft beer, where consumers are rejecting big brand beverages and seeking out alternatives, companies that create in small batches, using organic ingredients and artisanal practices.

Like craft beer, kombucha is attracting national companies to Roanoke. Following in the footsteps of Deschutes Brewery, Humm Kombucha will be moving to Roanoke with plans to open its East Coast operation in 2019.

But despite gains, kombucha is still a hippie drink with an unpronounceable name to many (kom-bu-cha). Danek says only 17 percent of the U.S. population knows what kombucha is and only three percent are buying it.

"So there's so much room for growth," Danek says. "I really believe it's the next wave. It's already happening."



What is KOMBUCHA, *exactly?*

It's an ancient beverage, whose beginnings are murky. Did it come from Tibetan monks? Russian healers? Chinese emperors? No one knows how the first SCOBY developed, but in all likelihood, it was an accident of nature involving sweet tea, bacteria and natural yeasts.

Not until the mid-1990s when a California teen named GT Dave began bottling and selling his family's home brew did GT's Kombucha become the first commercial buch to hit store shelves.

It took a backlash against sugar and soda and an awareness of probiotics and gut health to propel this beverage from hobby brewers' basements and health food stores into everyday life.





Luke Gardner and Luke Suess — two Patrick Henry high schoolers — create and bottle their four flavors of Lukes' Kombucha at Sweet Donkey Coffee House in Roanoke.



**BUFFALO
MOUNTAIN
KOMBUCHA**

"In 2009, much of the kombucha sold was very strong and vinegary," recalls Danek. "A handful of people acquired a taste; some held their nose just to get it down because they knew it was good for them."

Today's approximately 270 U.S. commercial makers stir up hundreds of flavors, most far more palatable than their forebears. Combinations range from orange mango and blueberry mint to cayenne lime and lemon ginger to grapefruit and hops to rose and lavender. Tha Best Kombucha rotates through more than 45 variations. This spring they're adding a chamomile-dandelion root-stinging nettles mixture.

"If we think a flavor tastes good, we bring it to the farmers market," says Brad Proca. "If it sells out within an hour and a half, we know it's going to be with us forever."

It's a testament to how young an industry kombucha-making is that many of today's brewers had never even tasted kombucha before the last few years.

Luke Suess is one of them.

A year ago, Suess and his friend Luke Gardner embarked on a science fair project testing the effect of kombucha on E. coli bacteria growth. Once the experiment was over, the teens still had their starter and supplies and they decided to keep creating. They tested flavors and shared with friends, perfecting their methods as they shuttled glass jars and jellyfish-like SCOBYs and heating mats between each other's homes.

Then Sweet Donkey Coffee House offered to let the boys brew in their commercial kitchen and, in February, Lukes' Kombucha—Roanoke's only local kombucha line—was born. They sold out in the first week and set about scaling up to more than double their production.

"It's something that we both love to do," Suess says.





Scott and Cassie Pierce, Buffalo Mountain Kombucha owners, distribute their bottled 'buch' throughout Virginia and North Carolina.



Kombucha IN Southwest Virginia

In Southwest Virginia, the tiny mountain town of Floyd is the epicenter of the kombucha revolution. While there are only a handful of kombucha makers in Virginia, two are located in Floyd: Buffalo Mountain Kombucha and Tha Best Kombucha.

The companies' origins are similar. Both are run by couples with children, both moved to the area from out of state, both found kombucha on their quest for a healthier, more homemade life. Both began brewing at home, then shared with friends, then took their product to farmers markets and expanded from there. Both credit Floyd's mountain-pure water as key to their success.

Both cannot keep up with demand. Tha Best Kombucha plans to nearly triple their production by year's end. Buffalo Mountain Kombucha hopes to not-quite double theirs.

"This year's starting off really strong for us," says Scott Pierce, Buffalo Mountain co-owner and brewmeister. "We're trying to gauge how to go to the next stage in our growth."

Both are benefitting from the explosion in kombucha's popularity.

"It still hasn't really hit the East Coast like it's hit the West Coast," says Pierce.

Humm's Danek thinks kombucha everywhere is just getting started. "I think eventually there will be more kombucha breweries than craft beer breweries," she says. "Kombucha is open to all ages — kids, college students. Unlike craft beer that is limited to people over 21, everyone can enjoy craft kombucha." ☆

