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SCOBY doo! Soda does a body good

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Water kefir refermented with apricots, dates and ginger is shown. Note fizz in the left bottle, being “burped” before opening — otherwise the results are explosive! (Photo courtesy of Alex Féthière)

Foods are officially health crazes when Costco sells them by the pallet. For years we’ve seen kombucha there, and I’ve used the bottles for my own brews.

Often those bottles are single-use, which are cheaper to make. Later in my brewing career I found much more versatile bottles. Flip-top bottles have enabled the coveted natural carbonation. If you opened a can or factory-sealed bottle, that’s not what you’re drinking unless it’s been “bottle conditioned.” And when you use a Sodastream, you aren’t firing sneezes from friendly bugs in a cartridge to bubble up your tapwater.

Natural carbonation occurs when yeasts (and in the case of kombucha variants, some lactobacilli) turn sugars into carbon dioxide and alcohol. In kombuchas a symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeasts — a SCOBY — includes bacteria that turn the alcohol into vinegar. Their breeding makes a lot of carbonation, some of which is easily smushed into a bottle at the end of the process.

If that sounds gross, you’re better off with mass-market beverages and their fake bubbles, probably made from power plant exhaust. Don’t worry, they cleaned it first!

I’ve been making some form of kombucha for six years, not only for its fizzy goodness but because it makes me feel great. Scientists have been undermotivated to research how that works because there’s no intellectual property to it, and that same open-source quality has made tracing its origins messier: If something belongs to everyone, who thinks of the inventor?

The name kombucha refers to a “cha” (tea) made by an apocryphal “Kombu,” a doctor in Japan, China or Korea who might have bred a colony of bugs producing a liquid that may have cured a Japanese emperor between 213 B.C. and 415 A.D. Sounds legit, but kombucha is actually a Russian plot — like so many these days.

Russia and Ukraine documented production and distribution of kombucha near the end of the 19th century. Russian and German POWs during WWI distributed kombucha “mothers” (rubbery biofilms made by, and full of, yeasts and bacteria — SCOBYs), and medics prescribed it to soldiers who couldn’t stomach field rations.

A Dr. Waldeck, writing in 1927 Russian Poland, described the mother/SCOBY as “a tough mucous mass” that a pharmacist gave him in a small broad-necked flask. Waldeck was instructed to put sugar and brewed tea in there to obtain the “miracle potion” that had cured his constipation. It worked well enough that two of his comrades were similarly relieved.

For my part, these fizzies are great for digestion and heartburn. I’ve routinely used them to counter bad fish and chips or anything heavy.

We’ve come so far from a freely shared folk medicine inhabiting various containers and fed whatever to a product distributed in standardized packaging. Yet each skimmed and clarified bottle contains the organisms to constitute a new mother under the right conditions.

Anyone who’s made enough kombucha — or related beverages, jun and water kefir — has been buried in cultures over time. The bacteria and yeasts produce not only probiotic sodas but architecture: “grains” in the case of water kefir, and rubbery mats for jun and kombucha. Enterprising designers have made clothes out of dried “kombucha leather.”

Originally, my jun culture came from a Shelton-area holistic therapy colony that treats cancer patients, among others. My water kefir grains came from www.yemoos.com, but what started as a handful has become a half gallon in a year. Both cultures have changed as they’ve multiplied with me. All living things do.

“Kombucha” could just as easily have been branded “kvass,” but it matters most that the culture is ours and that we share it. Who can resist an ancient Chinese saying? “Mutual aid enriches even the poor.”

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