

Flavored Kombucha : A Home Brewer's Guide

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Years ago, I fell in love with the flavor of GT's organic kombucha variety dubbed "Botanic No. 9," an immune-boosting blend of bilberry, honeysuckle and red clover. I began to wonder how it was made and discussed the topic with other kombucha brewers. To my delight, some of them were already experimenting with adding flavors to their kombucha! Soon an entire group of us was trying new combinations and sharing our favorite results. Enthusiastic tasters—some of them committed non-health foodies—were swooning for flavors like grape, goji berry and honey-ginger.

Flavored kombucha can be made in a few simple steps and many local, common, as well as tropical and exotic fruits, herbs and extracts are easy to incorporate into the brew.

If you're new to brewing kombucha I suggest you become familiar with the process of making regular, unflavored kombucha before trying the flavoring options (see the sidebar "Five-Step Kombucha"). However, you don't need to be highly experienced to be successful in making flavored brews. There's nothing particularly difficult about these methods even though they may seem complicated to some first-time brewers.

Please note that these flavored kombucha methods have not been tested for potential health-benefits. If you drink kombucha as part of a treatment protocol for a health condition, you should brew it only according to the method presented in *Nourishing Traditions* or *Kombucha Phenomenon* (see sidebar). Kombucha made accordingly has been tested and proven to contain dozens of health-promoting compounds. For example glucuronic acid (which aids detoxification), chondroitin sulphate (a component of cartilage), and B-vitamins (used for a wide variety of everyday functions in the body) are all found in kombucha. It contains compounds that boost immunity, improve digestion, and assist the treatment of many serious illnesses including AIDS, cancer, diabetes and multiple sclerosis.

THERE'S MORE THAN TWO FOR TEAS

The standard method of brewing kombucha calls for using organic black tea (orange pekoe) or organic green tea. Use a different style of organic tea (like oolong or pu-ehr) to dramatically change the flavor of the finished kombucha. Within each broad style of tea there are many particular types of tea.

In many ways kombucha mirrors the tea that it is made from. Light teas make light, thirstquenching kombucha; darker, more full-bodied teas make heavier, full-bodied brews (similar to lagers and ales). My favorite type is a dark, earthy brew made from Shou Cha pu-ehr tea. Others to try are Sencha green, Gunpowder green, Ti Kuan Yin oolong, Assam black and Darjeeling black. White teas do not contain enough caffeine to support the kombucha organism and should not be used alone to brew kombucha. White tea can be used as an herb, however.

Substitute different styles and types (or blends) of organic tea directly into the basic kombucha recipe. Brew, ferment and bottle the drink according to the basic directions.

FRESH, FROZEN, DRIED OR JUICED?

Fruit flavors are familiar and easy additions to kombucha. When fruit is added to kombucha its sugar feeds the yeast in the brew, which results in a natural increase in the carbonation. Fresh fruits, frozen fruits, fruit juices, or dried fruits are nearly always on hand in my pantry and are simple to include in kombucha. Some of my favorites are: fresh in-season (or frozen) blackberries, blueberries, boysenberries, cherries, grapes, peach slices, raspberries, and

strawberries; juices of apple, blueberry, grape, grapefruit, mango, mixed berry and pineapple; and even dried fruits like dates, elderberries, figs, goji berries, Incan berries (*Physalis peruviana*), mulberries and raisins easily mingle with the acidic drink and bring added carbonation.

SIMPLE FLAVORING INSTRUCTIONS

To make fruit-flavored kombucha, brew and ferment according to the basic directions (see sidebar below). When bottling, for each cup of kombucha, add 1 tablespoon fresh fruit, frozen fruit, or fruit juice. Or, for each cup of kombucha, add 1 1/2 teaspoons dried fruit. (For example, to a one-pint bottle add 2 tablespoons fresh fruit, frozen fruit, or fruit juice; or 1 tablespoon dried fruit.) Fill the bottle to the top with finished kombucha, leaving only a quarter inch of headspace. When the jar is filled (and tightly capped) the carbonation-producing yeasts thrive in an oxygen-free (anaerobic) environment. The carbonation is trapped, but there is little room for buildup of explosive gas in the bottle! (See sidebar “Bottling Tips.”) Place a sheet of waxed paper under the lid, cap the jars tightly, and store them in the refrigerator. The flavor will be stable for up to one week, and will become increasingly sour over time.

FLAVOR EXTRACTS AND INFUSIONS

Another truly simple way to flavor kombucha is to use pre-made natural, organic flavor extracts. Common extracts include vanilla, almond, lemon and orange. To flavor kombucha with an extract, brew and ferment according to the basic recipe. Then, when bottling, for each cup of finished kombucha add 1/8 teaspoon of your chosen extract. Place a sheet of waxed paper under the lid, cap the bottles tightly, and store them in the refrigerator. The flavor will be stable for up to one week.

Add grated, fresh ginger and raw honey for a sweet and spicy infused kombucha. To make ginger-honey kombucha, brew and ferment until the tea tastes “finished” (pleasantly tart). When bottling, for each cup of kombucha combine in a small bowl 1 1/2 teaspoons freshly-grated ginger root, 1 1/2 teaspoons raw honey, and 1 1/2 teaspoons filtered water. Use a fork to stir the mixture until evenly mixed. Then, strain and funnel the mixture into a bottle with a tightly fitting lid. Fill with kombucha, place a sheet of waxed paper under the lid, and cap tightly. Store in the refrigerator. The taste will be stable for up to one week.

A PHARMACY OF HERBAL ALLIES

Both herbalism and fermentation appeal to health-conscious, do-it-yourself personalities, so it’s no surprise that the two sometimes overlap. When alterative and tonic herbs are included in your kombucha, they can become simple, healthpromoting additions to your everyday routine. It’s especially rewarding to include herbs that you’ve gathered or grown yourself.

My favorite medicinal herbs to include in kombucha are calendula, chrysanthemum, dandelion greens, ginger, jasmine, lemon verbena, nettle, mint, red clover, sassafras bark, St. John’s wort, white tea and yarrow. Many of these herbs have been used in fermentation historically and traditionally; think of yarrow ale, ginger ale and root beer (made with sassafras bark).

Before making herbal kombucha set aside an additional kombucha culture (also known as a mother, SCOBY, or mushroom). This set-aside SCOBY (symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast) must never come in contact with the herbal brew. The properties and compounds in the herbs may affect the balance of bacteria and yeast on the culture and impact the integrity of future batches.

To make herbal kombucha, first reduce the amount of tea used by one-half. If you are using dried leafy herbs and/or dried flowers, add 2-5 times as much herbs as tea. Intensely flavored, finely-grated, dried barks and roots can be added in proportions equal to the tea. I suggest using a muslin spice bag to simultaneously brew the tea and herbs. Ferment and bottle the kombucha according to the basic method. Herbalists may enjoy creating personalized blends that please palates and constitutions. Remember to keep detailed notes of which herbs you include and the

proportions or amounts.

Fragrant, uplifting, and naturally sweet Flower Power Kombucha is my favorite herbal blend. To make it, combine 3 tablespoons organic rose petals, 1 tablespoon St. John's wort, 1 tablespoon red clover blossoms (about 3 large), 1 tablespoon chrysanthemum blossoms (about 3 large), and 1 tablespoon organic Sencha green tea. Then brew, ferment, and bottle according to the basic method described in the sidebar.

MANY FLAVORS, ONE CULTURE

The versatile kombucha SCOBY thrives on nearly all types and styles of organic tea. It graciously adapts to the addition of many traditionally fermented herbs. The kombucha beverage is equally flexible. Fruits and flavor extracts easily mingle with sweet, tart and effervescent kombucha. I hope that you'll try these techniques and perhaps even develop your own unique blend of tea, fruits, and herbs. Remember to take notes (and strain before serving) and you'll surely discover a unique and delicious kombucha brew—perhaps one precisely suited to your own constitution or even the tastes of your non-health foodie friends!

RESOURCES:

Fallon, Sally. *Nourishing Traditions: The cookbook that challenges politically correct nutrition and the diet dictocrats*. New Trends, Washington. 2000.

Pryor, Betsy. *Kombucha Phenomenon: The miracle health tea*. Sierra Sunrise, Sherman Oaks. 1996.

Prentice, Jessica. *Full Moon Feast: Food and the hunger for connection*. Chelsea Green, White River Junction. 2006.

SIDEBARS

FIVE-STEP BASIC KOMBUCHA RECIPE

This recipe combines the brewing techniques outlined in *Nourishing Traditions* by Sally Fallon Morell and *Kombucha Phenomenon* by Betsy Pryor. These methods ensure the most health-promoting properties in the finished drink. If you drink kombucha as part of the treatment of a health condition you should always brew according to a recipe that relies upon these techniques.

The space where you brew kombucha can be kept as cool as 65 degrees F or as warm as 75 degrees F. To hasten the fermentation in cooler conditions add up to 2 cups of finished kombucha to the brew. Above 75 degrees F the fermentation accelerates and the tea can easily become too tart, tasting of vinegar within only a few days. Always remember to use non-reactive kitchen utensils washed with non-toxic dish soap (rather than detergent).

3 quarts clean water (well, spring, or filtered)

1 cup evaporated cane sugar

4 tea bags organic, black tea or 2 tablespoons loose-leaf, organic, black tea in a large muslin tea bag or other tea strainer

1/2 cup finished kombucha or 1/4 cup apple cider vinegar

1 kombucha mushroom (SCOBY)

Step 1: Bring one quart of the water to a boil. Remove from the heat. Pour the water into a one-gallon heat-safe glass bowl or wide-mouth jar. Add the sugar and the tea. Stir until the sugar is dissolved. Cover and steep the tea for as little as 15 minutes, or until cool. Remove the tea bags. Add the remaining 2 quarts of water.

Step 2: Add 1/2 cup kombucha from a previous batch or 1/4 cup apple cider vinegar (this acidifies the tea and prevents contamination from other microorganisms). Place the mushroom, dark-side down, in the liquid.

Step 3: If you are using a bowl, cross several strips of masking tape over the top (to keep the cover from falling into the liquid). Cover with a tightly-woven cloth. Secure the cover tightly with a string or rubber band. Fasten a label to the jar with the date it was made. Store in a warm (about 70 degrees F), well-ventilated place, away from fruit bowls, compost bins and houseplants, and out of direct sunlight.

Step 4: Depending upon the room temperature, the kombucha will be ready in six to twelve days. Kombucha is ready to drink when the liquid looks relatively translucent and a “baby” kombucha mushroom has formed above the mother. Most people prefer kombucha slightly sweet to pleasingly tart. After about one week taste it daily. When the flavor suits your taste, bottle the tea.

Step 5: To bottle kombucha, remove the mother and the baby mushroom from the brew. Use a non-reactive funnel and glass jars or bottles with tightly fitting lids (or flip-top bottles). Fill the jars to the top, leaving only 1/4 inch of headspace. Place a sheet of waxed paper underneath the lid. (The paper prevents the acidic kombucha from corroding the lid.) Store in the refrigerator. Makes about 2 1/2 quarts.

To restore effervescence to chilled kombucha, remove from the refrigerator for 15 minutes. Strain the tea just before serving. Keep one or both of the SCOBYs to make additional batches of kombucha. Extra SCOBYs can be composted along with other kitchen waste.

BOTTLING TIPS

Bottling kombucha makes the brew portable and can increase the carbonation. Follow these tips to ensure that your bottled kombucha stays tightly closed, doesn't corrode your lids, and has carbonation without exploding!

1. Use a jar with a tightly fitting lid. I recommend using regular-mouth mason jars, glass mineral-water bottles and twist top kombucha bottles (save, wash and re-use them). All are inexpensive and ubiquitous. Another option for bottling kombucha tea is to use bottles with a flip-top lids. Many German brands of beer are sold in bottles that can be washed and re-used. New flip-top beer bottles can also be purchased at most kitchen supply and brewery supply stores.
2. Use a funnel to fill the jars or bottles. Kombucha can safely come into brief contact with high-quality stainless steel and food-grade plastic. Look for Norpro brand stainless steel funnels. Their funnel and strainer combination really simplifies kombucha bottling!
3. Fill the jars or bottles to the top, leaving only about 1/4 inch of headspace. Fill the jars to help create an oxygen-deprived environment where carbonation-producing yeasts can multiply (when the jar is tightly capped). This also prevents the buildup of a large amount of gas under the cap. When the air space is small, there is much less chance of violent explosions resulting from pressure built-up under the cap.
4. Use a sheet of waxed paper under the lid. Kombucha is acidic and over time it will corrode metal lids. The waxed paper will protect the lid so that it can be reused indefinitely. It also helps to create a leak-proof gasket to trap the drink and carbonation inside.
5. Cap the bottles or jars tightly to keep the carbonation and the kombucha trapped inside!

SCOBY STEWARDSHIP

Kombucha mushrooms or SCOBYs (a somewhat clinical acronym for Symbiotic Colony of Bacteria and Yeast) can be obtained from others who make kombucha or from a trusted supplier like Cultures for Health or Gem Cultures. The website “The Kombucha Exchange Worldwide” (<http://www.kombu.de/suche2.htm>) is a resource for connecting with people who sell and even give away cultures. Brewers often desire to share their prolific mushrooms!

Store extra kombucha SCOBYs for up to one month by placing them in a non-reactive container covered with sweetened tea. Cover tightly and keep at room temperature. The cultures can be stored longer if the tea is regularly

drained and more sweetened tea is added.

Because kombucha SCOBYs are created with each new batch I suggest you keep two or three mushrooms on hand for brewing and compost the others. SCOBYs are mats of cellulose and abundant in microorganisms. They make an excellent addition to your household compost or worm bin.

Always remember to reserve a SCOBY before making an herbal kombucha. The addition of herbs may disrupt the microbiotic balance of the culture. Compost or otherwise discard both of the SCOBYs from an herbal batch. Don't use them to culture future batches of kombucha.

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