



Buddha's Brew Kombucha

by KELLY STOCKER / photography by MELANIE GRIZZEL

Kombucha can be a divisive topic. In a world of high-sugar sodas and lightly flavored water, there's nothing quite like its bright, bubbly, vinegary profile. People who love kombucha swear by its probiotic properties and antioxidants. People who hate it often can't get past the SCOBY, that "symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast," that floats atop the fermented beverage. Either way, the trendy beverage has surged in popularity, and one of the biggest players in the kombucha market, Buddha's Brew, is based right here in our fair city.

Buddha's Brew founder, Kimberly Lanski, came to love kombucha in a way that is so Austin: over lunch with friends at the macrobiotic cafe, Casa de Luz. "At the time, I was meditating a lot, an active

part of a spiritual community. We'd have lunch, and a friend of mine would show up with his home brewed kombucha in wine bottles. I just loved it."

In 2006, a serendipitous trip to the SFC Farmers' Market at Sunset Valley changed the course of her life. Lanski distinctly remembers glancing over at the kombucha vendor and thinking, "That would be a perfect job for me." Then one day, that guy quit. "When I learned the spot was available," she says, "I jumped on the opportunity. I started making kombucha at home and selling it at the market. Soon I was making enough to support myself, and I took it on full time."

Lanski did a brisk trade at the farmers market, and her particular brand of sour balanced fruity kombucha developed a cult following. Even so, it was still a surprise when a Whole Foods Market representative dropped by to propose putting Buddha's Brew in stores. "Well, I knew my home bottling operation wasn't going to cut it," Lanski laughs. "I needed to ramp up production big time. I brought on a business partner — a fellow meditator — and we scraped together \$50,000 to rent a warehouse and build a commercial kitchen. It took a lot of work to understand the scope of what was necessary for production, but by 2008, we were fully operational, and in 2009 we were in Whole Foods stores throughout the region."

It's kind of an entrepreneurial dream story. A person finds what she loves, does it well and enjoys large scale success. However, "it's not all sunshine and rainbows," Lanski discloses. "In 2010, all kombucha was pulled off the shelves because of its alcohol content. In the scramble to get it back in stores, many commercial brands diluted their product and began filtering out live strains. Then they'd re-add probiotics in powder or pill form that would never naturally occur in kombucha." Though big brands were the first to acquiesce, the heightened scrutiny on kombucha affected her colleagues in small businesses as well. She watched as fellow purveyors made changes that undermined the true nature of the product, often in the quest for a larger market.

Buddha's Brew, however, held true to its natural approach. After considerable research, Lanski and her business partner figured out how to get the live cultures to eat up all the alcohol. "It was important to me that we kept ours full strength. I refuse to compromise my integrity or the integrity of my product. We have 19 billion live cultures per bottle, and we routinely lab test to make sure all those little organisms are happily swimming around. If you don't believe it, leave a bottle of Buddha's Brew out for a couple of days — first the top will explode off, and then it will start growing its very own SCOBY."



Lanski's dedication to product integrity extends beyond her operation. She's also part of an organization called Kombucha Brewers International that's actively working to set up a standard of identity for the product. "So much of the commercially available kombucha is still adulterated. Sure, it'll say probiotic on the label — and that's true to an extent — but the FDA hasn't mandated that kombucha needs to contain naturally occurring live strains. Lots of brands are filtering out all the good stuff." This kind of regulation feels more critical than ever, she explains. "In 2006, there were five kombucha companies in the nation. Now there are 500."

Their fierce dedication to a high quality product is certainly paying off. Buddha's Brew has outgrown its original commercial kitchen and is taking over all the space on the warehouse property to build a beautiful brewery. They are laser focused on optimizing production, but they still like to play around and experiment, using real fruit and mixing in surprise ingredients like live cultures from grapevines growing at the Barton Creek Greenbelt. Their seasonal and one off flavors reflect their excitement about experimentation. "Last year we did a guava that was amazing," says Lanski. "Watermelon was really great. And we did a peppermint chocolate that was surprisingly delicious."

They've also begun hosting tours and events in their garden and brewing space. "Eventually I want to make group events a regular thing. I love our space, our garden and the greenbelt. I can see this being a boon to the business and a natural next step for us." And, in a full circle moment, they recently hosted the global Whole Foods Market team for a lunch and a tasting out at the brewery.

What started out as a sharing lunch among friends has become a thriving business. Lanski finds joy in the "connection we have with people who love kombucha. There's a community here," she says. "I consider them my people, my tribe." While Buddha's Brew is on retail shelves, they're still vending at eight farmers markets around the Austin area, engaging with customers one on one. "It's so rewarding to hear first hand stories from customers about how kombucha has made their bodies work better," Lanski shares. "The way I figure it, if you can do something that helps people and makes money, then you're blessed."

Buddha's Brew retails at Whole Foods, Central Market, HEB and eight farmers markets. It's available in bottles, growlers and kegs. You can also find it on tap at several restaurants and bars if you'd like your kombucha served cocktail style.

For more information, visit buddhasbrew.com



Kombucha Moscow Mule

Makes 1 serving

6 oz. ginger Buddha's Brew kombucha
1 ½ oz. vodka
Dash of lime juice

Combine kombucha, vodka, lime and ice, and shake, shake, shake. Strain into a copper mug, and add fresh ice. To make it pretty, add a fresh herb garnish and a lime wedge.