

Initial Version of Undergraduate Essay

Drinking *Kombucha* Healthy or Not

“This is Ginger.” I smiled politely at the woman my mother had just introduced. Although she appeared harmless enough, with her petite stature, strawberry-blond hair, and shy smile, I would later discover that her physical appearance should not have been my concern. It was her radical views on physical health and nutrition that would alter the norms in my household and leave long-standing consequences that still affect me nearly twenty years later. The most significant of these changes was a fermented tea called *kombucha*. After defining and describing it, I will explain how it is made and then compare the effects of *kombucha* with those of today’s popular soft drinks.

According to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, *kombucha* comes from the Japanese word for tea sponge. Through fermentation, a tea sponge or a “thriving colony of microorganisms,” turns ordinary green or black tea and sugar into a beverage with a taste that has been described as “somewhere between a vinegar soda and carbonated apple cider” (Neighmond 2013). Many of my family’s friends and acquaintances who tried this odd beverage seemed to agree; the most frequent comment being that it tasted and smelled like either vinegar or beer. The most memorable description, however, was flatly and crudely stated by one of my father’s coworkers, “That stuff tastes like yak piss,” he stammered as he choked and spat. **Transition phrase here?** There have been a few of these tasters who enjoyed their first taste and asked for a starter kit of liquid and a few tea sponges to begin their own home breweries. For most people, though, it is the quintessential acquired taste. **Suggest adding a few sentences for smoother segue into next paragraph. Did you and your parents like it immediately?**

My parents brew hundreds of gallons of this beverage each year. They start with untreated spring water, green or black tea, white sugar, a *kombucha* (tea sponge), and “starter” *kombucha* from a previously made batch. Once the tea is steeped and cooled to a specific temperature, the tea leaves are removed and the liquid is transferred to glass jars. One tea sponge—a slimy, rather disgusting, slightly rubbery substance about the size of a compact disc—is added to each jar along with a small amount of “starter” *kombucha*. Cheese-cloth squares are affixed to the top of the jars and the jars are placed in a temperature-controlled environment to brew in an open-fermentation process for the next nine to ten days. Once the tea has morphed into *kombucha*, the tea sponges are removed and the fermented liquid is strained into glass jugs for another mellowing process. This last, closed-fermentation, process turns the tea into a softly fizzy drink similar to any carbonated beverage.

When first reading the ingredients list, *kombucha* seems as unhealthy as other beverages containing large amounts of processed sweeteners. Unlike soft drinks, however, where the sweetener is still sugar (or high fructose corn syrup) at the time of consumption, the sugar in *kombucha* is actually food for the tea sponges. During fermentation, that slimy colony of microorganisms converts the sugar into lactic and glucuronic acids: two organic acids that are beneficial to the human body. Lactic acid assists in digestion while the “potent detoxifying” (Fallon 573) glucuronic acid aids the human liver in neutralizing toxins in our bodies.

This sugar-converting process is certainly not present in any soft drink on the market today. *Kombucha* neutralizes the negativity of sugar while soft drinks such as Coke and Pepsi deliver the equivalent of fifteen teaspoons of straight sugar per twenty-one ounce serving directly into the blood stream. Additionally, and in contrast to *kombucha* which aids in digestion and

detoxification, drinking a twenty-one ounce Pepsi each day would ‘reward’ me with “twenty-four pounds of extra, empty calories per year” (Brownell 168).

During the twenty-year period since *kombucha* has entered my life, it has been gaining notoriety at the national level. Some hail it as an immune system booster, magical cure-all, and anti-aging potion while others view it as a highly suspicious drink that should be researched more thoroughly and perhaps even regulated by the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau. Regardless of the controversy, though, most agree that *kombucha* is vastly different from the sugar-laden drinks consumed by most of society today, and some research studies show that its differing effects on the human body may be equally vast. If this controversy continues, it may become popular enough to be the “answer to the scourge of cola drinks that now wreaks havoc with the health of Western populations” (Fallon 572). **Mention Ginger again?**

In the meantime, while *kombucha* may not cure cancer or even the common cold, I have experienced it as a healthful beverage. I am choosing to believe that it is, at the very least, not as detrimental as today’s popular carbonated drinks or sports beverages and I intend to enjoy our homemade *kombucha* for the next twenty years. And even though it can now be found at most health food shops as well as the local Giant grocery store, I much prefer our homemade version to any of their flavors. It is more fizzy, has a pleasing sweet/sour taste, and it fits into my limited budget much more easily.

Revised Version

Kombucha Beats Soda

“This is Ginger.” I smiled politely at the woman my mother had just introduced. Although she appeared harmless enough, with her petite stature, strawberry-blond hair, and shy smile, I would later discover that her physical appearance should not have been my concern. It was her radical views on physical health and nutrition that would alter the norms in my household and leave long-standing consequences that still affect me nearly twenty years later. One of the most significant of these changes was a fermented tea called *kombucha*. After defining and describing it, I will explain how it is made and then compare the effects of *kombucha* with those of today’s sodas.

According to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, *kombucha* comes from the Japanese word for tea sponge. Through fermentation, a tea sponge or a “thriving colony of micro-organisms,” turns ordinary green or black tea and sugar into a beverage with a taste that has been described as “somewhere between a vinegar soda and carbonated apple cider” (Neighmond). Many of my family’s friends and acquaintances who try this odd beverage seem to agree; the most frequent comment being that it tastes and smells like either vinegar or beer. The most memorable description, however, was flatly and crudely stated by one of my father’s coworkers: “That stuff tastes like yak piss,” he stammered as he choked and spat. At the other end of the spectrum, though, there have been a few of these tasters who enjoyed their first sip and asked for a starter kit of liquid and a few tea sponges to begin their own home breweries. But for most people, it is an acquired taste.

While my father liked his first taste of *kombucha*, my mother did not and had a different reason for acquiring a taste for it. She says she could hardly choke down her first sip but because Ginger had bounced cheerily into our house holding up a gallon jar full of *kombucha* asking, “Are you ready to make *kombucha* yet?” she managed to keep her face neutral so as not to upset her friend. By that time, my mom had also read about *kombucha* in a weird-food cookbook—

also at Ginger's request—so despite its taste, she decided to give it a try. Within a few weeks she and my father were both consuming several cups a day.

For me, acquiring a taste for *kombucha* began years later. I was a self-supporting adult before making the choice to drink *kombucha* as an alternative to soda. That decision was made easier by my parents offering to add a few extra gallons to their own batches so I would not need to set up my own brewery.

The brewing process starts with untreated spring water, green or black tea, white sugar, and a *kombucha* (tea sponge). Once the tea is steeped and cooled to a specific temperature, the tea leaves are removed and the liquid is transferred to glass jars. One tea sponge, a slimy, slightly rubbery substance about the size of a compact disc, is added to each jar along with a small amount of “starter” *kombucha* from a previous batch. Cheese-cloth squares are affixed to the top of the jars and then placed in a temperature-controlled environment to brew in an open-fermentation process for the next nine to ten days. Once the tea has morphed into *kombucha*, the tea sponges are removed and the fermented liquid is strained into glass jugs for another mellowing process. This last, closed-fermentation process turns the tea into a softly fizzy drink similar to any soda.

When first reading the ingredients list, *kombucha* seems as unhealthy as other beverages containing large amounts of processed sweeteners. Unlike sodas, however, where the sweetener is still sugar (or high fructose corn syrup) at the time of consumption, the sugar in *kombucha* is actually food for the tea sponges. During fermentation, that slimy colony of microorganisms converts the sugar into lactic and glucuronic acids: two organic acids that are beneficial to the human body. Lactic acid assists in digestion while the “potent detoxifying” (Fallon 573) glucuronic acid aids the human liver in neutralizing toxins in our bodies. This sugar-converting process is certainly not present in any sodas because, conversely, while *kombucha* neutralizes the negativity of sugar, Coke and Pepsi deliver the equivalent of fifteen teaspoons of straight sugar per twenty-one ounce serving directly into the blood stream. Additionally, drinking a twenty-one ounce Pepsi each day would ‘reward’ me with “twenty-four pounds of extra, empty calories per year” (Brownell 168) whereas the same amount of *kombucha* gives me a one-hundred-calorie shot of probiotics.

During the twenty-year period since *kombucha* has entered my life, it has been gaining notoriety at the national level. Some hail it as an immune system booster, magical cure-all, and anti-aging potion while others view it as a highly suspicious drink that should be researched more thoroughly and perhaps even regulated by the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau. Regardless of the controversy, though, most agree that *kombucha* is vastly different from sugar-laden drinks and there is increasing research showing that its differing effects on the human body may be equally vast. If this controversy continues, it may become popular enough to be the “answer to the scourge of cola drinks that now wreaks havoc with the health of Western populations” (Fallon 572).

Although my mother has lost touch with Ginger, I continue to be grateful to the harmless-looking woman with the shy smile. While the teenager who met her did not appreciate her drastic influence over the food and beverages consumed in our house, the adult has learned to value a daily diet of nutritious foods washed down with an odd beverage made from a tea sponge.

Works Cited

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