

San Jose Mercury News

Taste-Off



KIM KIM FOSTER/KRT

Kombucha, the popular fermented tea drink, has gone mainstream. This fizzy, funky concoction is reputed to aid digestion, boost immunity and ward off hangovers, according to its passionate fans.

Add some culture to your tea

Take a glass of sweet tea. Add yeast, bacteria and time, and what you get is kombucha, a fizzy, funky, vinegar-flavored elixir that's believed to be a magical cure-all for just about any ailment.

Long enjoyed by the health-conscious, this refreshing,



JOLENE THYM

fermented brew is finally going mainstream, thanks to a growing number of kombucha-makers that are offering an inspired array of styles and flavors available in most supermarkets.

The drink, which has been around for thousands of years, can be made at home with any kind of tea. However, the process is a little tricky, as it depends on developing a healthy "mother" or "scooby" (symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast), a mass of yeast and bacteria microbes. After fermenting several days, the sugars are transformed into beneficial organic acids, active enzymes, amino acids and polyphenols. Fans of kombucha assert that it aids digestion, promotes liver function, boosts immunity and even prevents hangovers. And that's just a partial list.

But when DIY goes awry, the culture can easily tilt out of balance, making the kombucha too fizzy or not fizzy enough, too sweet or sour, too high in alcohol — or it can spoil. A safer and simpler option is to buy it. Bona fide kombucha costs \$3 to \$4 per bottle. You can find it in the refrigerator case, packaged in glass. The label should say that it contains live, active, raw cultures. A good kombucha always has at least a hint of vinegar flavor, about 0.5 percent alcohol, and a pleasant balance of tart and sweet.

Flavor profiles vary wildly because of fermentation times, acidity, sugar content and added flavors. In general, "original" kombucha tends to be slightly more acidic or vinegar-forward in flavor. It's an

acquired taste. Newcomers may want to start with flavored varieties, which are a bit sweeter and have more calories.

Here's the lowdown on seven kombuchas — in

original and flavored versions — available at local markets. Calorie details refer to an 8-ounce serving.

Revive Kombucha Original

This rich, elegant brew pours like fine wine and tastes like perfectly brewed, fermented tea. It's reminiscent of beer, but sweeter, with no bitter aftertaste. A serving has 56 calories. A 16-ounce bottle is \$3.99 plus a \$2 bottle deposit at Whole Foods.

★★★★

Reed's Goji-Ginger Kombucha

Fans of fresh ginger will love this tart, punchy drink that tastes like fresh ginger beer. It's made with oolong tea and yerba mate, but fresh ginger root is the primary flavor. A serving has 50 calories. A 13.5-ounce bottle is \$2.99 at Sprouts Market.

★★★★

Bucha Lemongrass Ginger Live Kombucha

Brew a cup of tea, add ginger, lemon grass and fizz, and this is what you get. The tea's faint vinegar aroma is the only evidence that it's not simply a nice gourmet soda. A serving has 47 calories. A 16-ounce bottle is \$3.19 at Whole Foods. ★★½

Clearly Kombucha Raspberry Ginger

There's a refreshing, bright flavor to this sparkling raspberry drink, though newbies may find it a bit earthy and sour. This locally made brew begins with green tea and is finished with juice. A serving has 30 calories. A 12-ounce

bottle is \$2.79 at Whole Foods. ★ ★ ★

TheBu Lavender Kombucha

The slightly sour, watered-down flavor of this beverage is saved by a strong hit of fresh lavender. A serving has 28 calories. A 16-ounce bottle is \$3.49 at Sprouts Market. ★ ★ ½

GT's Organic Raw Original Kombucha

This extremely popular version will quench a thirst, but it's bland and forgettable. A serving has 30 calories. A 16-ounce bottle is \$3.49 at Sprouts Market. ★ ★

Celestial Seasonings Original Kombucha

This pungent, throat-burning elixir tastes like a hit of cider vinegar straight from the bottle. The promise of wellness on the label is the only reason to drink this. A serving has 30 calories. A 16-ounce bottle is \$2.99 at Sprouts Market. ½ star

Reviews are based on product samples purchased by this newspaper or provided by manufacturers. Contact Jolene Thym at timespickyeater@gmail.com.

Outlet Name	Unique Impressions	Date
<i>San Jose Mercury News</i>	516,700	4/21/14
<i>San Jose Mercury News</i> - Online	1,355,997	4/21/14
<i>Contra Costa Times</i> - Online	174,045	4/25/14
<i>The Oakland Tribune</i>	39,730	4/27/14
<i>The Oakland Tribune</i> - Online	176,503	4/27/14
<i>Contra Costa Times</i> - <i>Sunday Central</i>	147,206	4/27/14
<i>Hayward Daily Review</i>	26,705	4/27/14
<i>San Mateo County Times</i>	25,221	4/27/14
<i>The Fremont Argus</i>	27,415	4/27/14
Total	2,489,522	