

Kombucha Culture: An ethnographic approach to understanding the practice of home-brew kombucha in San Marcos, Texas

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Abstract
Kombucha, a traditional fermented tea beverage touted for its numerous health benefits, has seen a dramatic rise in popularity over the last fifteen years. Once exclusively found in specialty health shops and only known by a small number of Americans, now numerous commercial brands of bottled kombucha are widely available. Interestingly, even as the fermented drink has become more accessible to the public, specialized groups are increasingly likely to brew it themselves. Following the trend toward home production and brewing of many kinds of edibles and crafts (Caruso 2015), homebrewing kombucha is now practiced across the nation (Crum 2016). As enthusiasm for consuming and brewing kombucha – process which takes continued, dedicated effort – has spread, small towns like San Marcos in Central Texas have not been immune. This study explores the “kombucha culture” of San Marcos, asking: What is it about this effervescent drink that compels people to become so devoted to their home-brew practice? As noted, even as an increasing number of people now consume kombucha regularly and practice brewing the beverage at home, there has been very little formal exploration on what could be driving this phenomenon. My research project aims to understand the unseen motivations of people who practice brewing kombucha in their own homes within the San Marcos area. This study utilizes an ethnographic approach and qualitative methods to reveal the underlying influences and inspirations that encourage a kombucha habit. Techniques utilized in this study include interviews with individuals and couples who brew at home, multiple focus groups with networks of home brewers, and participant-observation of and within this kombucha-enthused community. As a home-brewer myself, I bring a unique “insider” perspective to the study, as well as being able to leverage my own access to the homebrewer network to achieve study aims. This inquiry reveals three key themes revolving around the commitment to kombucha: the multi-faceted health benefits, an engagement with sustainable food systems and environmental concern, and a sense of community and group inclusion. Brewers construct networks of exchange between each other, swapping physical and cultural material that fosters trust, friendship, and bonding. The shared beliefs, collective values, and common practices of kombucha home-brewers culminates in a particular sociocultural constructing, which I term Kombucha Culture. Kombucha Culture goes beyond 5 providing an explanation of why people are brewing ‘buch in San Marcos; it is the embodiment of ideals about how food, the environment, and community should work together at the local scale in a sustainable system to ensure health and wellbeing for all. Studying kombucha brewing practices is one way to better understand how to work towards these universal goals.

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MISUNDERSTANDING #4 – Brewing Kombucha at Home is Dangerous! FALSE – Some people claim that Kombucha has to be made in sterile facilities with climate controlled brewing rooms by properly trained professionals. While that kind of cleanliness is always important in commercial production (yes all KKamp Fresh Live Cultures are produced in a fully inspected commercial facility!), home brewing does not require this level of care. What you may not realize is that Kombucha is antiseptic! Many new Kombucha homebrewers start off their adventure with a single batch brewed in a one gallon glass jar. This is the classic image of Kombucha brewing on the counter. They want to dabble first and see if they like making their own. But then something happens.