

I got my first SCOBY last night. It's like Christmas, that is if you woke up on December 25<sup>th</sup> to find the gross, pale, pancake-like culture that you always wanted sitting under the tree. It looks like something out of a sci-fi horror movie, sitting menacingly at the bottom of its mason jar, tendrils of bacteria extending from its underbelly.

But while it may not be the most attractive thing in the world, the latest addition to my kitchen counter is already working to make me my first batch of home-made Kombucha, the effervescent, fermented beverage that has taken the health food community by storm in recent years.

Though Kombucha has only recently become popular in the western world, it has been around for millennia. Its exact origins are unclear, but there is a general consensus that it came from ancient China, in northeast Manchuria, then spread through Russia to the rest of the world.

One Kombucha origin-myth holds that a monk named Kombu used his fermented tea (cha in Japanese and Chinese) to cure the Japanese Emperor Inkyo of a stomach complaint.

Kombucha tea is made by fermenting sweetened black tea in a container with a SCOBY (symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast) for about two weeks. Though no scientific studies have proven it, many people swear by the invigorating and medicinal properties of the drink.

This latest Kombucha craze is the actually drink's second act in the United States. Back in the early 1990s the fermented tea became popular with the health food community and with HIV and AIDS patients who believed that it helped their immune system and improved their T-cell count.

Kombucha's first act came to an abrupt halt when the Center for Disease Control (CDC) linked the drink to the death of one Iowa women and the illness of another. Though no direct link was ever proved, Kombucha sales plunged.

The recent resurgence in Kombucha's popularity came in 2003 and 2004 when the Atkins diet got huge; dieters wanted a sweet, fizzy drink to replace the soda that they could not longer drink.

Demand has exploded. Now everyone even Red Bull is making Kombucha, and celebrities like Reese Witherspoon have been seen drinking the tea.

SPIN, a market research and consulting firm says that Kombucha sales grew by a staggering 27% last year to roughly \$370 million. Those sales are projected to reach \$500 million by 2015.

Doctors say that the drink can be dangerous to those with a weak immune system and that the high amount lactic and other acid means that it should be consumed in moderation.

But their assertions that there is no statistical evidence to suggest Kombucha is beneficial to your health don't seem to be slowing growth by one SCOBY.

Kombucha advocates on the other hand believe that the drink can do everything from fight cancer, to cure hang-overs, to lower cholesterol, to improve digestion, some say it can even cure hair loss.

I can't attest to any of that (except the helping with hang-overs bit), but I have noticed a marked increase in my energy whenever I drink a G.T's Synergy Kombuche.

And in 2 weeks I'll be able to see how my homemade stuff compares!