



Aqua ViTea.
KOMBUCHA
PREMIUM PROBIOTIC TEA



Producer OF THE *Month*

APRIL 2020



BRATTLEBORO FOOD CO-OP

Producer OF THE Month

by Jon Megas-Russell



The origins of the fermented beverage kombucha date back a few thousand years to where it was first consumed in China, Russia, and Europe. Today it is a drink that is either loved or loathed. Some say it tastes too much like vinegar, others love the sparkling flavor that is often sweetened with fruit juice. The reality is that kombucha's popularity is spreading and it can now be found in almost every grocery store, including the Co-op. CEO and Founder of Aqua ViTea Jeff Weaber fell in love with and perfected this nourishing beverage while he was a home brewer, then launched the Vermont kombucha company called Aqua ViTea, and the success of their kombucha has taken off as the company has utilized both ancient tradition and modern technology to create a unique and sparkling beverage offering.

The story of Aqua ViTea starts in 2003 when Jeff brewed his first batch of kombucha at home while

he was working at the Lucky Labour Brewing Co. in Oregon. In 2005 Jeff and his wife Katina moved from Oregon to Salisbury, VT, as she pursued medical degrees. Once he landed in our state, he began perfecting his kombucha with the goal in mind of bringing a healthy replacement for soda to as many people as possible. In 2007 he began selling his kombucha at the Middlebury Farmers Market. He thought it would be a nice way for Katina to meet people and build her practice while he made some money for the family. He admitted that he never imagined the business growing to the scale that it is today, although he is very proud of what he has accomplished. Middlebury Food Co-op was the first place to sell Aqua ViTea on tap. By 2010 they were bottling product and shipping it all over New

England and New York. By 2013 demand had outpaced what they could make on the farm in Salisbury, so they secured funding and opened a state-of-the-art facility in Bristol, VT. This expansion allowed them to continue distribution deeper south to Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. In 2015 they were able to take over the space where Woodchuck Cider is brewed in Middlebury, VT, and began investing heavily in technology to support their brewing, testing, and distribution. They are now distributed as far south as Florida and as far west as Chicago.

In 2010 there was a big kombucha scare when Whole Foods found that certain brands of kombucha were above the legal limit for alcohol. While alcohol is a naturally occurring element in fermented drinks, it was alarming to many in the natural food industry as this beverage was supposed to be a dependable alternative to both soda and alcoholic beverages. Aqua ViTea's operation in Salisbury was visited by federal

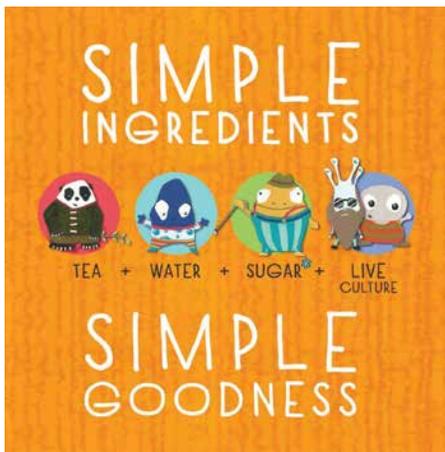


inspectors who went through their whole set-up. While Aqua ViTea ended up not coming under scrutiny from the visit, it left a long-lasting impression on Jeff. He started deeply investigating the concept of extracting alcohol from his kombucha. After this recall, many companies claimed to have figured out exactly how to stop the fermentation process at a point where alcohol would not be present, however, this was not something that Jeff believed he could do without sacrificing the nourishing ingredients that are produced from a fermented drink. With kombucha intended to be a healthy beverage for children, mothers-to-be, and even those in recovery, it was important for Aqua ViTea to deliver something that indeed would not jeopardize their “Pledge of Authenticity.” This included the statement that they commit to “reliably produce non-alcoholic kombucha.” So, after a few years of research he began to pair the ancient brewing traditions of kombucha with science to produce what he believed to be a

deep new take on the industry. With this philosophy now leading decision-making, they decided to take the leap and purchase a cone alcohol extractor and a gas chromatography machine. The cone extractor would gently extract alcohol from the kombucha without jeopardizing any of the beautiful vitamins and nutrients that were produced from fermentation. The gas chromatography would then test it to ensure the extractor maintained the purity, probiotics, vitamins, and nutrients. Additionally, they invested in shelf-life testing to ensure that their product sustains these qualities and continues to offer these benefits throughout the entire time it sits on your grocery store shelf. All this was part of the commitment Aqua ViTea wanted to make to its customers and truly bring innovation to an industry that needed some positivity.

The Aqua ViTea brewery has a group of state-of-the-art fermenters ranging from 6,000 to 12,000-gallon tanks. Their brewers shared that

80% of their job is to clean, while the other 20% is actually brewing. Cleanliness is a vital part to any brewing operation and Aqua ViTea is no exception. If you are not familiar with how to make kombucha, it is a time-tested process where you essentially brew tea, add sugar, introduce a scoby to ferment the tea and sugar, and when that process is complete, you end fermentation and mix in other ingredients such as juice, herbs, or spices. The fermentation process can differ with each batch based on temperature and climate but takes somewhere from two weeks to a month. During our visit we were lucky enough to have the brewer open the door on a fermenter for us to view the largest scoby we had ever seen. I bet you’re wondering what exactly is a scoby? As Aqua ViTea states: “The term SCOBY is an acronym for Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria and Yeast. This squishy gelatinous mass that some people call a “mushroom” is often mistaken as the SCOBY. The squishy mass is, in fact, a cell mat—a pad



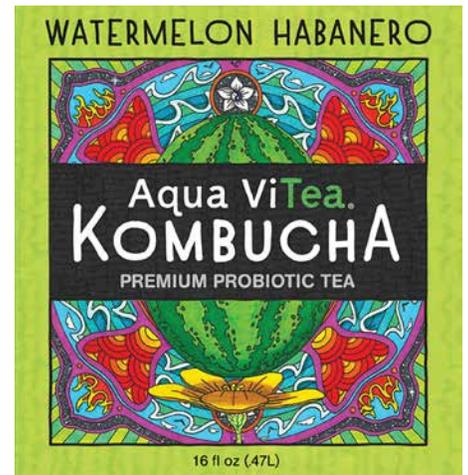
of lifeless cells that are a result of the biological process of SCOBY fermentation. It does have bacteria and yeast in and on it, however the living symbiotic culture itself is...the Kombucha!”

The ingredients used in their kombucha are mainly organic and from the finest sources. The basis of the kombucha is water and, while not organic, they use delicious Vermont water. The tea is organic and is sourced by Stone Leaf Teahouse in Middlebury, VT, who also sells tea to the Brattleboro Food Co-op Bulk department. Local ingredients include apple cider for their seasonal fall kombucha, which is sourced from Vermont’s Champlain Valley Farms. U.S.-grown ingredients include organic juices such as blueberry, peach, and turmeric. They use organic Madagascar vanilla beans and organic Tuscan blood orange juice, among other organic ingredients from around the world, such as ginger, lemon, pineapple, and habanero peppers. They have always prioritized organic ingredients and, when paired with certified non-alcoholic kombucha, you can clearly taste the difference in every sip. Their recent best sellers have been BlueBernie and Peach Mint, which can both be found on tap, in the bottle, and in cans here at the Brattleboro Food Co-op.

The Aqua ViTea team now consists of about 30 people, with 23 on site



in Middlebury and the rest sales representatives who work across the U.S. The company recently began to offer full healthcare for all full-time employees, and they are quite proud to do so. They hope their team continues to grow as sales pick up, and are optimistic about two new innovations: hard kombucha and vodka, both of which are natural spin-offs that developed as a result of the Whole Foods recall. Within Aqua ViTea’s customer base, hard kombucha offers a delicious alternative to millennials who tend to choose spiked seltzers. Although sales have not yet taken off, the company is optimistic about its popularity increasing with the upcoming warm weather. Their



other innovation is a by-product of their kombucha cone extraction process: alcohol. Once extracted, the raw alcohol is sent off to their friends at Appalachian Gap Distillery to further distill it to a delicious vodka. With these two new areas, it seem inevitable that their team can grow and bring more great jobs to Vermont.

What does the future bring Aqua ViTea? First, new flavors like their most recent offer, Pineapple Lemon. They always test new flavors by offering them first on tap at stores, waiting until it has proven to be something people want to drink before they start bottling and using more packaging. The next area of growth are cans of their kombucha, which will offer smaller serving sizes and allow for more shelf locations in one store. For instance, you can now purchase the Aqua ViTea cans in our Deli’s grab-and-go here at the Co-op. Ultimately, the most important goal of Aqua ViTea is to have their products sold at schools and hospitals. They want to support people with a healthy alternative to soda. This dream is already coming to fruition now that their kombucha is on tap at UVM Medical Center, but they want to do more to increase this type of distribution. Give Aqua ViTea Kombucha a try as it is a delicious, refreshing and absolutely nourishing beverage.

